

Self-Censorship as a Socio-Political-Psychological Phenomenon: Conception and Research

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Self-censorship of information, defined as an act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others in the absence of formal obstacles, serves as an obstacle to the proper functioning of a democratic society, because it prevents free access to information, freedom of expression, and the flow of information. It is of key importance in societies, as it blocks information that may shed new light on various societal issues. Nevertheless, it is recognized that in certain cases self-censorship is necessary. The present article provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for self-censorship and examines it from various angles with empirical examples. It describes its nature and psychological foundations, the motivations that underlie it, the conditions that facilitate its practice, its societal and individual consequences, and, finally, its measurement challenges.

KEY WORDS: self-censorship, censorship, flow of information, democracy

Self-censorship has the potential of being a plague that not only prevents building a better world, but also robs its performer of courage and integrity.

One of the key socio-political-psychological questions that should preoccupy human beings is why individuals do not reveal validated information even though no formal censorship is activated to prevent its exposure. This phenomenon, called self-censorship, takes place in every social space, beginning with the interpersonal through the intraorganizational and up to intrasocietal settings (see Bar-Tal, Nets-Zehngut, & Sharvit, in press). For various reasons, individuals decide not to reveal truthful information to their family members, close friends, fellow group members, members of organizations, media, leaders, or society members. In all of these cases, they believe that there is cost in revealing the information, and therefore they choose to conceal it. Of special interest are societal cases in which it is clear that the self-censored information may contribute to the improved performance of the society and/or prevent its wrongdoing, and individuals still withhold it and do not reveal its content to other society members (see as examples of cases, Nets-Zehngut & Elbaz, in press).

One example of self-censorship involves many thousands of French soldiers taking part in the Algerian war who participated in—or witnessed—the widespread torture of hundreds of thousands of Algerians—many innocent civilians (Nets-Zehngut & Elbaz, in press). Branche and House (2010) in this vein noted: “During the war, the French security forces used torture on a very large scale not only to fight against the nationalists. . . . Torture was, in essence, an everyday form of violence employed throughout Algeria for many years by French troops. . . . Although impossible to count, the number of victims of torture was numerous, possibly hundreds of thousands. They were civilians and fighters

indistinctly called ‘rebels’. Resorting to violence was routine and perpetrated far from foreign eyes or media attention and denied by the French state” (p. 117).

Although torture is forbidden by law, for many years after the war, until well into the 1990s, these soldiers, with the cooperation of French society and French authorities, but with no formal censorship, self-censored this horrible experience. With few exceptions, they did not talk about it, the mass media did not investigate it, writers did not write about it, and film directors avoided this theme (for example, see Austin, 2007, regarding self-censorship in French films).

The present article focuses precisely on these cases of self-censorship in a society. On this macro-level, the response to the posed question is important as it illuminates a particular angle of societal functioning, because self-censorship serves as a barrier, blocking information that could potentially facilitate various constructive and functional processes of improving the society. Since the article focuses on self-censorship in society, it is important to first clarify the general value of a free flow of information. Following this, the article provides a definition of self-censorship and discusses its nature. It then describes the psychological bases of this important phenomenon. The next section introduces the underlying motivational basis of the self-censorship and differentiates self-censorship from two sociopsychological concepts: conformity and obedience. The next two sections present its antecedents and consequences. Finally, the article discusses issues of measurement. Relevant research in the context of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict¹ is provided as validating evidence of the proposed conceptual framework.

The Importance of a Free Flow of Information

One of the major values in any democratic society is freedom of expression to assure a free flow of information (Dahl, 2006). The free flow of information is intimately related to the civil liberties that grant free expression (e.g., Barendt, 2005; Mill, 1869; Schauer, 1982). Where free flow of information is not encouraged and protected, these liberties are diminished.

Freedom of expression is anchored in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* that states (Article 19): “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”² In fact, this principle not only guarantees freedom of expression and protects the freedom to communicate in public, but it also promises free and full access to information and the free flow of information. Such unrestricted access to all necessary official information is a crucial dimension of general freedom and a condition for the development of a free and critical political climate, enabling a well-functioning democratic society. A free flow of information and free access to information also provides the necessary conditions in every society³ for the development of open-minded, well-informed, knowledgeable, and critically oriented group members

¹ Intractable conflicts are violent, fought over goals viewed as existential, perceived as being of zero-sum nature and unsolvable, occupy a central position in the lives of the involved societies, require immense investments of material and psychological resources, and last for at least 25 years (Bar-Tal, 2007, 2013; Kriesberg, 1993).

² In 2005, a Human Rights Resolution was adopted focusing on the right to know the truth in very specific situations of gross violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law. Specifically, the resolution stresses the “imperative for society as a whole to recognize the right of victims of gross violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law, and their families, within the framework of each State’s domestic legal system, to know the truth regarding such violations, including the identity of the perpetrators and the causes, facts and circumstances in which such violations took place.” This resolution goes beyond freedom of expression in requiring disclosure of information that is often censored and self-censored by authorities of a society and by society members (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Resolution 2005/66, “Right to the Truth,” April 20, 2005, E/CN.4/RES/2005/66).

³ This article will refer to a society as a social unit because it focuses on macrolevel analysis that refers to a societal phenomenon. I recognize that the outlined principles can also be applied to the analysis of microlevel units.

who know how to search for, process, use, and express information. This value is crucial for the rational participation of citizens in democratic societies, who receive information and then can evaluate it (Almond & Verba, 1963).

Moreover, full and free access to information in a society affects the public interest and the well-being of a society in a number of important ways: (1) It raises the value of free expression and critical thinking to a central position; (2) It increases the likelihood of development of free deliberative and open discussions; (3) It increases the scope of public discussions; (4) It enables accountability and transparency of the system; (5) It assists leaders and individual society members in making balanced, well-informed, and well-merited decisions on societal issues; (6) It facilitates social management according to moral codes by avoiding and preventing moral transgressions; (7) It provides efficient and useful control and supervision of the system; (8) It expedites election of appropriate leadership; (9) It allows dynamic change of opinions; and (10) It facilitates development of tolerance. In general, the free flow of public information in any social group is a mark of good governance, transparency and assurance that those in power will not hide their misdeeds. It also assures moral conduct of the society in its intragroup and intergroup relations. Above all, it endorses effective participation of an informed electorate that can evaluate the goals, policies, and actions of those who govern and make decisions, as well as the views and behavioral intentions of the society as a collective. All these features provide one of the bases for the development of the well-functioning democratic society and, therefore, free flow of information that allows provision of information as one of its hallmarks.

It is axiomatic in the twenty-first century that every member of a democratic society has the right to be informed and to inform others in order to enrich pluralistic societal public discourse. Freedom of information involves the right of the people to know the whole truth; it compels the disclosure of authorities' affairs as well as matters of public interest. It emphasizes the need for transparency, responsibility, responsiveness, openness, and accountability of authorities, government, formal institutions, and public officials to the people. It should be practiced for the public good (Raz, 1991). Thus, freedom of expression, free access to information, and free flow of information provide a set of criteria to evaluate the functioning of the democratic society (Dahl, 2000; Raz, 1991). An uninformed society can easily become unruly and hard to govern or in contrast, obedient and totalitarian; information and knowledge are limited, censored, controlled, and manipulated as in Orwell's *1984*. But there is no need to go so far; authorities and institutions even in democratic regimes often have a vested interest in restricting information and opinions to prevent criticism, accountability, and transparency in order to maintain their power.

Nevertheless, it must be recognized that in every group or society there is tension between the free flow of information and its restraint. An unrestrained flow of information may also harm a group or a society. In fact, even the most liberal, democratic, and enlightened states consider it necessary to suppress at least some information and opinions. The European Convention on Human Rights (2010), after setting out the essential rights to information and communication, states (Article 10):

The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or the rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary. (p. 11)

This provision is not surprising because societies cannot function well without some level of information limitation, especially in the area of security—but also in other areas—and therefore they

control and regulate the flow of information formally and informally (e.g., Halperin & Hoffman, 1976). This limitation does not apply only to various institutions and organizations related to security but may even include scientific publications which could provide information leading to harmful acts (O'Loughlin & Sherwood, 2005).

In addition, other arguments have appeared in different societies during different periods, all advocating self-censorship, and the suppression of particular types of information. For example, in societies that have experienced internal schisms with severe consequences, self-censorship has been suggested in order to avoid continued societal polarization. In other words, it is argued that revelation of past misdeeds leads to polarization and dysfunction in a society (e.g., Estmond & Selimovic, 2012; Nets-Zehngut & Sagi Elbaz, in press). For example, in the case of Spain, many societal sectors prefer silence rather than to investigate human rights' violations during the Franco era, in order to avoid a new societal schism (e.g., Richards, 2002). Additionally, sometimes there is a dilemma between the freedom to know and the right to privacy, when the information may harm individuals, including leaders, and in these cases too there are voices that support self-censorship (e.g., Volokh, 2000). Usually societies define the domains of information that should be kept secret and adopt laws and rules to assure that the information is not released. Individuals who violate these laws are punished, and various mechanisms may often be used (for example, censorship) to prevent the information from being disclosed (De Baets, 2002; Peleg, 1993).

In this vein, I suggest that almost all suppressed information can be considered in both ways, either as a double-edge sword that with its revealing has negative and positive implications or as a one-sided blade indicating that when the information is revealed, it can clean the malignant growth. History has taught us that much censored information should and could have been revealed. Thus, the two opposing societal needs must be balanced: on the one hand, the need for free expression and free flow of information for a well-functioning society and, on the other, the need for secrecy to assure the well-being of the society.

Groups differ in the way they manage this tension between the two opposing needs. In some groups, there is less control and more flow of information than in others. Well-functioning democratic societies allow more freedom of expression and free flow of information than societies which are governed by authoritarian regimes. The former societies cherish values of freedom, encourage free flow of information openly in public discourse, and even set freedom of expression as a goal that should be encouraged in the educational system. In any event, the continuing tension between the two opposing societal needs characterizes every democratic society, and there is an ongoing struggle between views of what should and should not be revealed to the public. Eventually, in line with their worldviews, values, and their normative patterns of actions, human beings decide the outcome of this struggle in their role as leaders or citizens.

It is possible to postulate then that freedom of expression and free flow of information are at least dependent on the nature of the regime that governs the society, the societal political culture, the political socialization of the younger and older society members, and in the context in which the group functions. As an example, one of the distinguishing contexts that has a major effect on free flow of information is that of violent conflict (Hameiri, Bar-Tal & Halperin, in press). In this context, the formal institutions usually limit free flow of information because the issue of security gets top priority and, in their view, this need supersedes the value of freedom of expression in importance.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that free flow of information, free expression, and free access to information are not only limited by formal laws, rules, and mechanisms but also by sociopsychological limitations. People, acting as individuals and as members of collectives, limit free flow of information, free expression, and free access to information, even when no formal obstacles exist. For example, they may conform to perceived pressure of a majority and not express their opinions, or they may be obedient to an expected worldview of the authorities. The present article focuses on one

specific sociopsychological barrier to free flow of information and free expression, namely, *self-censorship*, that will now be defined and discussed at length.

The Nature of Self-Censorship

Self-censorship of information, defined as *the act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others in the absence of formal obstacles*, is one of the sociopsychological mechanisms that often obstructs a well-functioning democratic society. Together with conformity and obedience, it should be considered as a sociopsychological barrier that prevents free access to information, obstructs freedom of expression, and harms free flow of information.

Surprisingly, social-psychological research has relatively neglected the study of self-censorship, which takes place on an individual level in a social context and which has important implications for groups, including societies. Research has been preoccupied with a number of areas that are different in their interest and emphasis: investigating the factors that allow a minority to influence the opinion of a majority (De Dreu & De Vries, 2001; Prislun & Christensen, 2005); the conditions and effects of dissenting opinions in groups (Allen & Levine, 1969, 1971); and the degree of freedom to express opinions of critics in their group (Hornsey, 2006; Packer, 2008). These directions do not touch upon the essence of self-censorship and have a different focus as they deal with the wide form of opinions.

However, self-censorship has been noted by other behavioral and social scientists. In micro social environments, and especially families, it is viewed as secret keeping, and family experts have discussed it extensively (Roded & Raviv, in press; Brown-Smith, 1998; Karpel, 1980; Petronio, 2010; Vangelisti, 1994). It has also been noted in the context of organizations, especially in the discussion of malfunctioning organizations and whistleblowers, who break self-censorship and reveal information (Adamska, in press; Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2003; Morrison Wolfe & Milliken, 2000; Near & Miceli, 1996; Westin, 1981). Relatively little conceptual work has been done in the societal context, in spite of the fact that this phenomenon has been observed to be quite prevalent, mainly in the mass media or in other societal-cultural agencies (Antilla, 2010; Elbaz, Nets-Zehngut, Magal, & Abutbul, in press; Kenny & Gross, 2008; Lee & Chan, 2009; Nelkin, 1995). For example, Maksudyan (2009), who analyzed translations of history books into Turkish, demonstrates how writers, translators, and editors in Turkey censored themselves when addressing information involving the genocide of the Armenians during World War I either to avoid public censorship or to gain approval from the dominant sector in society. He argues that self-censorship occurs “when the cultural agent censors the work [a publication with the narrative] voluntarily, in order to avoid public censorship or in order to achieve approval from the dominating sector in society” (p. 638).

Various conceptions of self-censorship have included expression of opinions, feelings, or thoughts in their definitions (Gibson, 1992; Hayes, 2007; Horton, 2011). For example, Hayes, Glynn, and Shanahan (2005) defined self-censorship as “withholding of one’s true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion” (p. 299). By defining it widely, the distinction between cases of self-censorship and those of conformity is blurred (see, for example, the instrument developed by Hayes, Glynn, Shanahan, 2005, to assess self-censorship, and their definition).

Elaborations on Components of Self-Censorship

If we focus on societal cases, the definition of self-censorship suggests the following prerequisites: The actor must have new information that has not been revealed to the public, must be aware that he or she has truthful information, and believes that the information has implications for the society as a whole, for other society members, or for another group or set of persons or for an accepted worldview. The act of censorship indicates that the individual intentionally and voluntarily decides to

withhold (does not share) this information in spite of the fact that there is no formal obstacle like external censorship that prevents him or her from sharing it. This behavior implies that individuals informally control and regulate the flow of information—or in other words, obstruct free access to information, freedom of expression, and free flow of information. I will elaborate upon a number of clarifications.

Information versus opinion. The present conception limits the nature of self-censorship to information, that is, it focuses on withholding information rather than on withholding an opinion. Information is viewed as factually based knowledge that can be known from personal or reported experience, research, or a document. It refers to something that actually happened and is considered verified and validated, that is, factual.⁴ In this case, individuals believe that the information is based on evidence and does not depend on personal views and is therefore truthful. In contrast, opinion is personal knowledge that goes beyond the data. It reflects inferences, attributions, evaluations, or impressions among others. Legal experts make the same distinction between information and opinions (Barendt, 2005; Schauer, 1982). They consider information as a synonym for facts, while thoughts, ideas, beliefs, or value judgments are viewed as synonyms of opinions. Thus, opinions are an expression of a subjective view that may rest on information, with the intention to elaborate and comment on it based on personal understanding. In this conception, everybody is entitled to an opinion, and there are many different opinions, and therefore the status of opinion does not possess the power of truthful information. The latter has a different status for people, as it often does not have competition and is frequently perceived as unequivocal in providing evidence. Since I am aware that subjective judgment is possible when distinguishing between an opinion and information, from a sociopsychological perspective, the understanding of self-censorship requires that a person believes that the possessed information is valid and truthful, and then he or she may decide, because of this perception, not to reveal it.

Limitations of self-censorship. Self-censorship, as defined, is practiced only in cases where there are no *formal obstacles* to withholding information, but individuals nonetheless decide voluntarily to not reveal it. The present definition excludes cases in which there is a formal institutionally established external obstacle that prevents sharing information, such as official censorship, orders, or laws (e.g., De Baets, 2002; Tribe, 1973). In these cases, self-censorship is in line with formal directives and therefore revealing information violates formal rules. The scope of self-censorship includes cases in which individual thinks that there are formal obstacles to sharing information, while in reality there are none. Individuals may imagine the existence of various types of formal censorship, but including these cases in the definition broadens its scope extensively without clear boundaries. However, the proposed definition also includes cases in which there may be social sanctions against sharing information without the existence of official obstacles. Social sanctions may be applied informally by individuals, groups, or social agencies that disapprove of information disclosure. Thus, it is possible to differentiate between formally enforced self-censorship and socially enforced self-censorship. While the former is excluded from the scope of self-censorship behavior, the latter is included. It does not mean that real or even imagined informal sanctions are disregarded. They may be very damaging and punishing. Nevertheless, there is a need to distinguish them from the formal sanctions that come to regulate behaviors formally with rules and laws. The other type of sanctions is of wide scope, and it is impossible to evaluate their subjective severity.

Content of the withheld information. The contents of the withheld information may touch on many different subjects that range from negative to positive meaning, such as immoral acts (for example, atrocities, corruption, illegal behaviors, and violations of rules and codes), embarrassing behaviors, scientific evidence, and even good deeds. For example, in Poland and Bosnia, individuals

⁴ I do not intend to claim a positivistic argument, understanding that information may also be viewed subjectively. But at least it is always based on the solid ground of factual knowledge.

withheld information about providing help to members of other groups (e.g., Jews in Poland, Muslims in Bosnia) in order to avoid negative sanctions from their ingroup (see, for example, Broz, 2004). The behavior about which information is withheld may be carried out by an individual or an authority or a group (or even by nature) and can be performed intentionally and unintentionally for different purposes.

In almost all cases, the person who has or gets the information believes subjectively that it has negative implications, and this is the key thought that leads to a dilemma and eventually, possibly, to self-censorship. The negative implications of information disclosure may include one of the following types: (1) It may have negative implications for the individual(s). The person believes that revealing the information may lead to negative sanctions against him- or herself. Moreover, in evaluating the implications for the self, the person also considers his or her own self-image or how other group members view him or her; (2) It may have negative implications for other specific individuals or a particular group. In this case, revealing the information may harm people who carried out the inappropriate act; (3) It may have negative implications for the ingroup. The person believes that exposure of the possessed information may harm the ingroup or segments of it; (4) It may have negative implications for a valued belief. In this case, the person believes that revealing the information may harm the status of a particular idea, value, goal, or ideology; (5) It may have implications for a third party (a person, a group, or a society). The person in this case believes that exposure of the information may harm other individuals, group(s), another interest group, an ally, a strong person, and so on.

Types of self-censorship. It is possible to differentiate between different types of self-censorship. One distinction is between self-censorship carried out either by gatekeepers or by ordinary people. The former are defined as individuals who hold positions in which they pass, transmit, and disseminate information to the public (for example, politicians, journalists, teachers, filmmakers, and so on; see Chang & Lee, 1992). According to Pettigrew (1972), gatekeepers are those “who sit at the junction of a number of communication channels, are in position to regulate the flow of demands and potentially control decisional outcomes” (p. 190). Ordinary individuals encounter information that, in their view, has importance for the group, but they do not play a role that enables them to disseminate it. Another differentiation is between individuals possessing first-hand versus second-hand information. First-hand information is acquired by the individual either through personal experience (participating in an event) or being exposed to it directly (e.g., reading an original document). Second-hand information is acquired through indirect exposure by getting it from another source: hearing or reading. Thus, the first type of self-censorship is based on withholding unequivocal truthful information, while, in the other case, its validity may be in question.

Psychological Bases of Self-Censorship

Self-censorship should be seen as sociopsychological phenomenon because by nature it involves intrapsychological processes. Individuals process information, get to know the content, become aware of its meaning, and then have to decide whether to reveal it or not (Cook & Heilmann, 2013; Horton, 2011). These processes are grounded in three psychological bases: The first is related to the fundamental human need to share knowledge that is violated by self-censorship; the second is related to the human identification with the society as a main restraining influence for self-censorship on a societal level; and the third is related to the personal experience of dilemma regarding the act of withholding information.

The need to share. The first basis is related to a fundamental premise that human beings evolutionarily tend to share, communicate, and disclose information and knowledge that they form, observe, and/or collect. Many of the evolutionary characteristics that have enabled humans to adapt to a wide range of physical environments, such as omnivorousness and toolmaking, create dependence

on collective knowledge and cooperative information sharing—a kind of *obligatory interdependence* (Brewer & Caporael, 2006). In the words of Harber and Cohen (2005), “there is a universal, prehistoric, and quite powerful motive for people to socially share major events. Behaviors in line with this fundamental motive increase group and self-survival” (p. 384).

In addition to these evolutionary needs, psychology recognizes that sharing troubling events enables their meaningful understanding, frees resources for coping with them, and also restores positive self-worth (Harber & Cohen, 2005; Pennebaker, 1990; Stiles, 1987). Harber and Pennebaker (1992) proposed an additional three reasons for the human tendency to share information about significant events: (1) It is based on emotional drive; (2) It serves a therapeutic function; and (3) It contains important implications for the listeners. Similarly, Kubey and Peluso (1990) suggested that people pass on major news stories not out of an altruistic desire to inform others but simply to relieve their own feelings (see also Stiles, Shuster, & Harrigan, 1992). I would add that society members who cherish democratic values are aware of the importance of a free flow of information and thus of the importance of providing information that is relevant to societal life and therefore feel the responsibility to reveal valid information to other society members. All these premises suggest that society members have a psychological and societal incentive to share information and not to practice self-censorship, especially in matters that are relevant and important for societal functioning. Thus, this psychological basis suggests that self-censorship in principle negates natural individual tendencies, and therefore, a serious motive must lead to this behavior. The next basis deals with this challenge and presents one of the most important reasons for the behavior of self-censorship.

Identification with a group. The second psychological basis for self-censorship in many cases is identification with a group. In contrast to the previous basis, this often provides an explanation for the practice of self-censorship. This case, which is of special interest for the presented conception, indicates that individuals as group members care about their group, try to maintain its positive image, and prevent acts or information that have negative implications for the image of the ingroup. One of the main reasons for this effort is that their personal identity is partly based on their social identity which also impinges on their self-worth. However, it should be noted that in some cases, it is exactly this basis which may lead to the motivation to reveal negative information that in view of the knowledge holder may improve the group functioning (Packer, 2008).

Social identity is denoted as the “part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). The process of constructing social identity is an individual one, based on self-categorization process (Tajfel, 1978, 1981, 1982; Turner, 1991; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). It is a pervasive and central human cognitive process that enables the organization of the complex social world into a meaningful structure (Brown, 2000; Tajfel, 1969, 1981). It includes a number of basic components: (1) the feeling of belonging to the given group; (2) the willingness to belong to the given group; (3) the importance ascribed to this belonging by the person; (4) the emotional attachment one feels towards the group; (5) the commitment to benefit the group; (6) considering the group as having highly valued qualities; and (7) deferring to the group’s norms and cultural symbols (David & Bar-Tal, 2009; Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, Halevy, & Eidelson, 2008). Each of these components is unique and adds a layer to the identification wholeness.

To strengthen the argument about the power of identification with the group, the concept of collective identity is also useful, indicating the shared awareness of group members who share the same social identity (Klandermans & de Weerd, 2000; Melucci, 1989). This “shared social identity is the basis of collective social power” (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2010, p. 60). Collective identification goes beyond the individual group member’s cognitive-emotional processes to the characterization of the entire collective. Of special importance are its two features: *a sense of common fate* and *concern for the welfare of the collective and mobilization and sacrifice for its sake* (David & Bar-Tal, 2009).

The former pertains to the sense of unity and the feelings of mutual dependence that prevail among members of a collective. It is the feeling of “togetherness,” the “cement” that connects individuals and social groups in unity (Brown, 2000) and enables them to define themselves as belonging to the same collective despite variability in values, beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of behavior. But the significance of shared fate is more extensive and implies that the fate of each of the collective’s individuals is perceived as dependent on the fate of the whole collective (Kashti, 1997). Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears, (1999) and Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (2002) have drawn connections between the common fate and members’ commitment, that is, the extent to which group members feel that they have strong emotional ties with the collective. They found that a high level of commitment is related to behavioral mobilization for the sake of the group (see also Reykowski, 1997). In addition, a society maintains norms and moral codes of what is accepted, allowed, and forbidden for self-protection. Society members learn these norms and codes and on their basis may use self-censorship. In sum, identification is a major sociopsychological mechanism that leads to protection of the ingroup. Certain contents are viewed as harmful, and society members are prodded either formally or informally to withhold them.

To a great extent, this basis underlies the act of self-censorship in a collective. In their attempt to protect their group, group members try to prevent dissemination of information that may harm the group. Revelation of such information by its nature often disrupts the harmony, the structure, the well-established functioning, and solidarity of a group. Thus, group members encourage and reward self-censorship, and they impose it upon themselves voluntarily to defend the group. In other cases, even if they are initially ready to share the truthful information that may have negative consequences for the group, they know that disclosure will have penalties for other members and/or the group authorities who try to protect the group.

But at the same time it should be noted that identification with the group may lead to contrary behavior as well. Society members who are loyal and care about their group may decide to reveal information that may even initially shed negative light on the group. But they do it in order to change the group direction or the way it carries out its policies or actions (Packer, 2008). This is the case when some group members, for example, observe that the group is behaving immorally, and they think that revealing these acts may influence the direction of group behavior. Thus, in both cases, identification with the group may have serious implications for self-censorship and is an important psychological basis for its understanding.

Experiencing dilemma. The third psychological basis of self-censorship refers to the experience of dilemma. In the case of self-censorship, a person is aware of possessing new unexposed information that is relevant to the society and should be revealed, but at the same time, is aware that revealing the information violates another principle, norm, dogma, ideology, or value and may cause harm. The level of the dilemma may vary from person to person and be dependent on the type of information, context, or other factors. But an individual always experiences at least a minimal level of dilemma when practicing self-censorship. The psychological rule is to reveal information, except when a person realizes that the information may hurt him- or herself, another person, a group, or an idea. In all these cases, after facing a dilemma and entertaining the options, the person may decide not to reveal the information, thus practicing self-censorship. This decision is also always dependent on the self-deliberation of pro and con considerations as to whether to reveal the information that involves both cost and reward calculations. Individuals assess what the costs and rewards may be for oneself, the ingroup, the outgroup, the system, or the idea, among others. When the costs exceed the rewards, the dilemma is resolved in favor of self-censorship (Affi & Steuber, 2009; Omarzu, 2000). If a person does not experience a dilemma, thinking that the information can be revealed, he or she shares it without hesitation. Contrastingly, a person may think that the information has no value and is therefore not worth sharing. In this case, withholding the information does not indicate self-censorship.

Motivations for Self-Censorship

A number of different, but not mutually exclusive, motivations may drive individuals to adopt self-censorship. Five of them are especially salient: motivation to protect the ingroup, personal motivation to avoid external negative sanctions and gain positive rewards, motivation to protect self-image, motivation to protect a belief, and motivation to protect a third party. The first motivation is based on the assumption that the information possessed may hurt the group and/or its cause, and therefore it should not be revealed. The perceived harm can be of a different nature such as hurting the positive image of the group by revealing information that sheds negative light on the ingroup or impairing the mobilization of the group members for a particular goal or goals. The information may also damage the interests or activities of the group; it may cause physical harm or hurt the dominant narrative, goals, ideology, policies, or leaders. For example, protection can refer to either a small group that has committed an immoral act or to the whole society because the act was carried out by its members. The most common motivations are based on the willingness not to harm an image of the ingroup (see Sagi Elbaz, Rafi Nets-Zehngut, Tamir Magal, & Guy Abutbul, *in press*; Magal, *in press*; Nets-Zehngut & Fuxman, *in press*; Vered, Ambar, Fuxman, Nahhas Abu Hanna, & Bar-Tal, *in press*). Thus, for example, society members avoid presenting information about immoral conduct as in the case of Belgians in the Congo, the Americans in Vietnam, the British in Kenya, the Dutch in Indonesia, or Israeli Jews in the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

From another angle, a study by Rosoff and von Winterfeldt (2007) centered on the likelihood and impact of a dirty bomb attack by terrorists on the Los Angeles harbor. They omitted some important classified material from the paper they posted on the Internet in order to protect the ingroup from someone's possible use of the material to build a bomb.

The second distinguishing motivation focuses on self and reflects self-care. Individuals practice self-censorship motivated by self-interest to avoid external negative sanctions and gain positive ones. On the one hand, revealing information may lead to damaged reputation, delegitimization, and being ostracized, or concrete punishment such as dismissal, imprisonment, and even physical violence (Horton, 2011; Nets-Zehngut, 2011; Papadakis, Peristianis, & Welz, 2006). In the case of gatekeepers such as journalists—they may not get any more information from their governmental sources (Elbaz & Bar-Tal, 2014). This motivation is underlined by fear. On the other hand, not revealing information may lead to receiving positive reinforcement, such as social approval, awards or concrete rewards, and even self-satisfaction. Leaders may withhold information believing that it has negative implications for them—and thus are motivated not to reveal it. For example, in Israel at least some of the soldiers who have carried out or witnessed violations of Palestinian human rights self-censor the information, because they do not want to get negative sanctions from their friends in the military unit, from their immediate social environment, from the army, and/or from the societal formal and informal institutions (Kimhi & Sagy, 2008).

The third motivation is intrinsic. Individuals adopt self-censorship to maintain their positive self-view. Having a positive personal identity is a fundamental motivation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), and thus society members do not want to perceive themselves as being slanderers and/or informants. In addition, society members draw the value of personal identity from their membership in a group (Tajfel, 1981). If the name of the group is damaged, the bad name also affects them. Thus, protecting the view of the group is also a protection of their own identity. With this motivation, French ex-soldiers or Israeli soldiers face themselves in their internal mirrors.

Self-censorship may be also motivated by the desire to defend and uphold a particular idea—a value, dogma, goal, policy, ideology, or belief. Individuals who adhere to a particular view may be motivated to uphold it even in the face of contradicting information. Nelkin (1995) noted that self-censorship is motivated by the desire to prevent exposure of “stories that run counter to prevailing values” or that are “politically charged” (pp. 111–112). For example, Antilla (2010) noted that the

American press practiced self-censorship and did not fully reveal scientific information about earth warming to the American public ostensibly in order to provide balanced reporting. This was done because “a highly organized and well-funded group of deniers of climate change has been exploiting the media in order to insert climate myths and questionable economic theories into the public dialogue” (p. 242).

Finally, self-censorship may possibly be employed to protect a third party because of care, interests, altruism, or other considerations. The third party can be a particular individual (for example, a leader or a friend), a small group, an interest group, or even another society. For example, some states in the world avoid publicizing information about the Armenian genocide in order not to offend Turkey (Hovannisian, 1999). In some ways, this motivation can be considered a protection of oneself or one’s own group because the third party may harm the persons or the group if the information is revealed. But the boundaries of this motivation are blurred, and therefore I have decided to cite it separately.

Two studies have investigated self-censorship by gatekeepers and their motivation to practice this behavior. One interview study was designed to investigate whether gatekeepers⁵ in three formal institutions (the National Information Center, the IDF/army, and the Ministry of Education) exercised self-censorship from 1949 to 2004 regarding the causes for the Palestinian exodus in 1948 and what their motivations for this behavior were (Nets-Zehngut, Pliskin, & Bar-Tal, 2015). It has been unequivocally established that one of the causes of the Palestinian exodus during 1948 war was their expulsion by Jewish military forces. This was strongly denied by the formal social institutions through the years. The results showed that the interviewed institution gatekeepers widely practiced self-censorship: Out of 33 interviewed gatekeepers,⁶ 20 admitted that they had practiced self-censorship. Of the 20 interviewees that said they self-censored, six worked in the Information Center, eight in the IDF, and six in the Ministry of Education. Collectively, they held their positions in these institutions largely throughout the research period, from the 1950s to at least 2004. Self-censorship may in fact have been more widely practiced, as 10 of the remaining 13 interviewees may have censored themselves despite not having admitted to this practice. They all knew that Jewish military forces had expelled Arabs during the 1948 war but decided (without being told by their superiors) not to bring this information to the public in their published materials. For example, referring to his work in the Information Center, one interviewee explained: “The topic of expulsions was not mentioned . . . we practiced self-censorship about what could have been written and what not. We practiced self-censorship about controversial topics.” The situation in the IDF was similar. One interviewee told of the assumption underlying the work at the Chief Education Officer’s Headquarters: “The general premise was that we all do not deviate; we are all patriots, all Zionists, do not want to admit that we expelled refugees.” Similarly, in the Ministry of Education, an interviewee explained that there was general agreement that the expulsion would not be included in the Curricula Branch’s publications, an agreement that he himself termed “self-censorship.” Talking about himself and his colleagues at the Curricula Branch he said: “None of us dared to convey the narrative of the expulsion.”

In addition, content analysis of the interviews identified the following five major motivations for the self-censorship reported by the interviewed officials in the three institutions.

Protection of Israel’s positive image. The first motivation aimed to protect the ingroup and specifically to prevent negative use of the information by the Arabs, as well as maintaining a positive image of Israel in the international community. The officials in the three institutions stated that they

⁵ The interviewed persons were 33 key officials who had worked in the three institutions almost throughout the research period, covering this period almost fully (e.g., heads of the IDF Information Branch, directors of the Information Center, and history team leaders in the Curricula Branch at the Ministry of Education).

⁶ The interviews were conducted with all living and available officials, currently or formerly holding senior positions in the three institutions and being responsible for their publications. Exceptions are the commanders of the IDF Information Branch; because of the fast turnover in the Branch (commanders were replaced every two to three years), only some commanders were interviewed, covering the main segments of the entire research period.

had concealed the information about the Jewish expulsion of Arabs to prevent its falling into the hands of Arab states, the Palestinians, or third parties in the international community and then being used by them for their political goals. For example, an official at the Information Center said “Alongside the real war being waged on us by the Arabs, along the borders and in terror attacks against civilians, an Arab information war is being waged across the world. This Arab information, aided by anti-Semitic elements—governments and individuals—is directed against the State of Israel and the Jewish people.”

Mobilization of the Israeli Jewish citizens. The second major motivation also intended to protect the ingroup—this time within Israeli society. The officials thought that it was their role to prevent a negative image of the state among the Israeli Jewish public who were the target audience of the publications issued by the three institutions. They stated that Israel was facing serious challenges and needed the complete devotion of its citizens and their mobilization to successfully cope with them. An illustration of this motivation was expressed by the former head of the IDF Information Branch, saying: “The soldier needs a sense of purpose that arouses the willingness to fight, and he carries within himself the courage to fulfill any duty, the capability to withstand the suffering of war and the willingness to sacrifice his most important possession—his life. . . . The duty of education is to bring the soldier to a willingness, a willful decision, stemming from recognition of and identification with the goal.”

Protection of the Zionist ideology. The third motivation was to protect the Zionist narrative, which is a major part of the Zionist national ideology, by not presenting contradictory information. Considering themselves Zionists, they felt that this was the right prism from which to view events. One interviewee in the IDF said “In my opinion, some of us were very blocked off to other opinions regarding the Zionist story, and we even diminished, suppressed, and parenthesized facts that surfaced, that were clearly facts, like the expulsions.”

Institutional norms. The officials in these state institutions adopted norms determining that it was their role to represent the state and thus present its narrative. This was a kind of bureaucratic motivation that indicated identification with the institution that one works for and then internalizing its views. This fourth motivation in some way represents the willingness to protect the state, feeling part of its organizational fabric. For example, as an interviewee at the Information Center reported: “Usually we were very very loyal, not only to the official line of information [. . .] so it’s true that we were seen as agents of the state. First of all, we really were agents of the state. Anyone working at the Information Center is an agent of the state. That’s just how it is.”

Fear of sanctions. This fifth motivation reflects the wish to protect oneself. Officials of the three institutions reported that fear inhibited critical writing and led them to censor themselves preemptively, thinking that they might be sanctioned by dismissal, denunciation, and ostracization—although this behavior was based on speculation because no formal instructions had been issued by the authorities to direct the content of the publications. As an employee in the Ministry of Education said: “I call it ‘political pressure’ because there was constantly the concern that if a question [about our publications] were raised in the Israeli Parliament, there would be a scandal. . . many things could have been done to us. They could have told us: ‘Go to be school inspectors; enough, we’re sick of you as writers.’”

In a similar study (Elbaz & Bar-Tal, 2014), use of self-censorship during a military encounter (i.e., the Second Lebanon War in 2006) was investigated on the basis of the finding that during the war, the Israeli media mainly presented the official narrative of the government and the army (Elbaz & Bar-Tal, in press). The findings based on 30 in-depth interviews with prominent Israeli journalists and public leaders, ministers, and parliament members showed that self-censorship was normatively widely practiced as part of the requirements of a state of war. The interviewees worked for eight leading Israeli news organizations, representing the most influential and/or popular news outlets within different types of media. Among the eight news organizations, there are three leading print-digital news outlets (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, *Haaretz*, and *Maariv*), all three broadcast outlets in Israel: two commercials (Channels 2 and 10) and one public (Channel 1) and two Israeli popular news radio stations (Kol Israel and IDF radio).

The journalists interviewed represented various journalistic positions: senior editors, midlevel editors, senior reporters, commentators, and hybrid positions. Quantitatively, of the 30 interviewees, 18 talked explicitly about practicing self-censorship. Twelve other interviewees referred to this practice indirectly by citing similar journalistic practices such as disinformation or publication of information as a result of personal relationships between journalists and politicians. Thus, we can say that throughout the war, the Israeli editors and reporters internalized the formal military censorship even when it was not necessary. The interviewed military correspondents and other journalists referred explicitly to the complete “mobilization” of the journalists on behalf of the military campaign, talked about widespread self-censorship and unquestioning acceptance of the official narrative from governmental and military sources of information. We identified five motivations for self-censorship during the War in Lebanon, three of them pertaining to the protection of the ingroup: maintaining national consensus, mobilizing citizens, fear of harming motivation among the soldiers; the other two referred to self-protection: fear of personal sanctions and fear of harming relations with sources of information within the government and the military elite. The mass media journalists practicing self-censorship thought that during a war they had to rally the public to support the military campaign and not to divide it by presenting information that could lead to disagreement with the governmental decision to go to war and then to implement it. They also thought they had to mobilize the Jewish Israeli population for active participation and not to cause harm when the challenges were so serious. Finally, they did not want specifically to undermine the motivation of the soldiers who were conducting the dangerous mission, and their motivation was crucial for the success of the war. But they also described self-centered motivations aiming at self-protection before possible sanctions of their superiors or the public. In addition, they understood that in order to receive information from governmental and military sources they had to report their narrative—otherwise they would be punished and disconnected from their sources of information. Some of the examples of sentences expressed by the interviewees were:

“The media is more patriotic today and play one tune because of the collective wish to be part of the consensus, especially in time of war when everyone is very militant. Under these circumstances, anti-war expressions are almost seen as betrayals of the nation.”

“I would like to say: when I was asked to join Channel 1 for as long as the war continued, I went to strengthen hands and not to let go of hands. So my current thoughts and expressions are not relevant.”

“Once the war begins, all feel an obligation to be united. Suddenly all party barriers fall, and people want to be together. The manifestation of this is the well-known expression: ‘be quiet, now shooting.’”

“It was clear that Yedioth Ahronoth wholeheartedly supported this war. Whoever wrote differently was ‘exiled’ to less prominent pages than the first pages.”

“Most of the media information sources come from the government and the army. Once the media are not attentive to the establishment, it will block the oxygen of its information. Of course, the media cannot afford this situation.”

Self-Censorship in Comparison to Related Concepts

Several other sociopsychological concepts and societal mechanisms are related to self-censorship and contain several related features, yet self-censorship can and should be distinguished from them: Among them are conformity and obedience.

Conformity

Conformity is the tendency to change one's beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors to match those of others who are in the majority (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). This change is in response to concrete pressure of group members (involving the physical presence of others and expression of what should be said) or imagined group pressure (involving the expected pressure as a result of norms or past experiences). The literature differentiates between private conformity (also acceptance or conversion) and public conformity (also compliance). The former takes place when individuals truly accept the beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors of the majority-group members, viewing them as reflecting valid and true positions. The latter takes place when individuals publically express the views of the majority, but privately continue to hold different views. The literature also differentiates between normative and informational conformity (influence). In the former case, people do not want to appear deviant, and in the latter case, people want to be accurate and have valid knowledge (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). The following features distinguish between conformity and self-censorship.

Nature of the act. Conformity is related to the fact that a group member perceives himself or herself to be a minority, and this perception leads him to hide his or her view by expressing the view of the majority. Self-censorship is not related to the perception of being a minority or a majority, but to the understanding that providing the information may hurt the ingroup, the person, or the idea. Thus, the point of departure from the individual perspective in both cases is different—in the case of conformity, the point of departure is that the majority holds a different view from that of the group member, and his or her view is not accepted by society. In the case of self-censorship, the point of departure is that a person has information which, if revealed, might hurt a society member or an idea. As an implication, in the case of conformity the knowledge that additional society members hold the view helps to reveal it, while in cases of self-censorship, this fact does not necessarily change behavior because the major motivation is often to block the information from coming into the public sphere (Allen & Levine, 1971).

Nature of the withheld knowledge. In the case of conformity, group members do not express either opinion or information in public, whereas in case of self-censorship the withholding of knowledge refers only to information that is viewed as truthful. Thus, the case of conformity covers a wider range of knowledge, and more often it refers to opinions because they tend to be more frequently in disagreement than validated information. In turn, self-censorship does not include opinions because it is clear that group members are entitled to hold different opinions, and they are subjective reflections in contrast to validated information.

Avoidance versus approach. Self-censorship focuses on silence—withholding information—that is, the avoidance of an action. Conformity in contrast implies an action—acting or reacting in line with the majority, that is, expressing an opinion or supporting information that confirms the view of the majority.

Different relations to the collective. Whereas self-censorship leads to withholding and concealing of information from the collective, conformity leads to adoption (at least publically) of the collective's majority views. Self-censorship does not indicate any acceptance of the view that the society holds regarding the subject of the information but indicates an awareness of the negative implications of revealing the information.

Motivation. While in many cases, the principal motivation to exercise self-censorship is to protect the group, in cases of conformity the primary motivation is always to protect oneself. In other words, the main motivation to conform is largely personal and self-focused, and it lacks the group-oriented motivation inherent in many decisions to self-censor information. Thus, in many cases of self-censorship, identification with the collective, as well as patriotic feelings, play a major role in the decision to withhold information.

Knowledge. In the case of informational conformity, individuals accept the view of the group as reflecting reality, yielding to the pressure of the majority. This means that individuals experience lack of clarity regarding their knowledge. But in the case of self-censorship, the information that individuals hold is clear to them. Thus, while the motivation in informational conformity is to create valid knowledge, in self-censorship, the wish is to prevent valid knowledge.

Obedience

Obedience is defined as performance of behavior(s) as a result of orders and instructions of the authority. Obedience, which refers to blind execution of orders without any consideration of their meaning or implication, was demonstrated in seminal studies by Stanley Milgram (1974). He proposed that it “is the psychological mechanism that links individual behavior to political purpose. It is the dispositional cement that blinds men to systems of authority. Facts of recent history and observation in daily life suggest that for many people obedience may be a deeply ingrained behavior tendency, indeed, a prepotent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy and moral conduct” (p. 1). Obedience is based on the beliefs that the authority has the right to make these orders and instruction, and it is required to follow them (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009). In contrast to obedience, self-censorship refers to withholding information on a person’s own initiative, without receiving explicit orders to do so. This is not done because of obedience in its classic sense. Even so, it is important to note that the collective-oriented motivations for self-censorship stem from the strong commitment to the group’s dogmas and beliefs, and this may be seen as obedience to the system or to the existing order.

In sum, self-censorship as a unique social complement to behaviors of conformity and obedience. These three behaviors are syndromes of withholding behavior—abstaining from freely expressing one’s own opinions and ideas, accepting orders without evaluating them and withholding information. They seriously harm a free flow of information, critical thinking, and freedom of expression, all needed for democratic functioning. Thus, it is not surprising that these behaviors are always found in authoritative collectives, even when the authorities do not use formal means of imposing censorship.

Contributing Factors

A focal question for understanding self-censorship is: What are the conditions that facilitate its occurrence? In trying to respond to this question, I would like first to propose the following categories of variables that influence the appearance of self-censorship: the context of the group, personal characteristics of the person who has the information, the type (content) of the information that is the subject of the potential self-censorship, and circumstantial factors. Each of the factors will be discussed below.

Context of the Group

Theories in social sciences have generally accepted the basic assumption that the study of a *social context* is essential for understanding the functioning of societies (e.g., Giddens, 1984; Parsons, 1951). Recently, Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) have defined social context as the “general and continuing multilayered and interwoven set of material realities, social structures, and shared belief system that surround any situation” (p. 103). The significance of the collective context lies in the fact that it dictates the society members’ needs and goals and the challenges that they have to meet in order to satisfy them. It also provides opportunities and limitations, stimulations and inhibitions, as well as the spaces and boundaries for human behavior.

In this line of thinking, the study of *macro contexts* is of special importance. Without the study of context, it is impossible to understand the functioning of individuals in groups, since human thoughts and feelings are embedded in historical, social, political, and cultural contexts (Bar-Tal & Sharvit, 2008). This embeddedness is a result of shared social life experiences, which include constant and continuous communication, social learning, and interaction (Giddens, 1984; Parsons, 1951). In other words, the thoughts and feelings of individuals represent the norms, beliefs, values, and attitudes of their group under certain conditions and in a particular epoch that construct the particular context in which people live. This includes two types of categories—one pertains to the political-economic-cultural characteristics of the society in which the case takes place, and the other refers to the particular situation in which this society lives. The first refers to more stable characteristics of democratic tradition, or traditional culture, as, for example, stratification, differentiation, authoritarianism, tolerance, closed climate, and norms for information exchange, among others. Examples include self-censorship practiced by the Hong Kong media (Ngok, 2007), avoiding criticism of Chinese political repression. The other variables refer to a relatively limited situational context of man-made characteristics that may last for a long period of time and have effects on involved societies, on the individual and collective levels (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2013). Examples include an intractable conflict or a military regime that has taken power. In a more limited framework, a closed system of communication, an intolerant society, threats and conflict, among others, provide a fertile ground for the evolution of self-censorship. One example is the self-censorship conducted by the American media (Mitchell, 2002) and even academia (Bhattacharjee, 2006; Bowen, 2005) during the War on Terror carried out by U.S. President George W. Bush. The other example is self-censorship in Israel as an accepted and even openly encouraged practice because of the ongoing intractable conflict with the Palestinians and also with other Arab nations.

In general, both types of context categories encourage or discourage the free flow of information, free expression, and free and full access to information, and this considerably affects the scope and extent of self-censorship. In extreme cases without formal censorship, formal organs of an authority or informal organizations may use thugs and even hit squads to impose self-censorship. The shooting of the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 in Russia because she revealed information about the Chechen wars that damaged the image of the state is a reminder that establishing a fearful political climate is possible.

Individual Factors

Self-censorship is also greatly influenced by the individual characteristics of society members. They include personality traits, general and specific worldviews, values, ideology, emotions, anxieties, attitudes, motivations, behavioral intentions, and others. These characteristics are relatively stable, but some of them can be aroused in the particular situation in which an individual is considering whether to reveal the information and are thus situation based. Examples of specific characteristics may include need for closure, anxiety, authoritarianism, collectivism, conservatism, identification with the group, level of patriotism, and type of patriotism. In addition, the role and the status of the person, as well as his or her level of involvement in the specific information and/or event may be considered. This category may also include personal expectations about possible future sanctions. This variable is related to the level of experience, fear about damaged reputation, delegitimization, dismissal, imprisonment, and even physical punishment.

Type of Information

An important category of variables relates to the type of information that a person holds. This category includes among other characteristics severity of the information, relevance to the present, type

of act that the information involves, time that the information relates, objects of the information, and issues raised in the information. All these variables have an effect on the way a person may handle the held information.

Circumstantial Factors

This category refers to variables that relate to the circumstances of collecting the information, such as how it was received, how many people know about it, and characteristics of the potential audience for revealing it (their identity, role, status, etc.). Of special importance is the time that has passed since a person or persons obtained the information and whether they personally were involved in the events that relate to the information. As time passes, a societal norm may develop not to reveal the particular information. This category of variables also encompasses the characteristics of the small group involved in particular acts that are the subjects of the information. A group such as a military unit may be cohesive, imposing a great deal of self-censorship on its members.

Three studies have examined the effects of circumstantial, informational, and personal variables on self-censorship (Shahar, Hameiri, Bar-Tal, & Raviv, in press). Specifically, they examined the effect of the following factors: characteristics of the potential audience, type of information that pertains to the social role of the parties involved in the event embedded in the information, type of information that pertains to the consistency of the information with the official narrative, and the effect of the conflict-related, personally held ideologies. The experimental role-playing method was used in which the extent of the agreement to self-censor as a dependent variable was assessed. In the first study, the goal was to examine the effect of the characteristics of the potential audience (i.e., information recipients) on the participant's willingness to self-censor information about the ingroup. Israeli Jews were ostensibly asked to evaluate the clarity of different news information that presented Israelis (i.e., the ingroup) in a negative way. The article presented an official real report written by The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), who estimated that since 2009, hundreds of Palestinian children were arrested, interrogated, and sentenced by the State of Israel, using tactics of violence and degradation, in violation of the UN's children's rights convention and international law. Participants were then asked to indicate how willing they are to share the negative information with four different information recipients who differed with regard to closeness to the participant: (1) closely related figures (e.g., family and close friends); (2) ingroup superiors (e.g., a commanding officer or a supervisor); (3) ingroup Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) (e.g., Israeli civil rights organizations); and (4) outgroup NGO's (e.g., international civil rights organizations). The results showed that participants' willingness to self-censor was strongest in the case of outgroup audience (i.e., outgroup NGOs) and significantly weaker for ingroup close recipients (i.e., family and close friends). This shows that reporting ingroup transgressions to outside individuals, organizations, or authorities is often considered a serious violation of the implicit rule that group members should not criticize their ingroup in front outsiders. As Elder, Sutton, and Douglas (2005) noted: "[I]t seems that an in-group critic speaking to an in-group audience is seen as 'clearing the air' by highlighting the group's weaknesses, thereby promoting growth and improvement. . . , but when speaking to an out-group audience, he or she is perceived to be 'airing the group's dirty laundry'" (pp. 240–241).

In the second study, Israeli Jewish males were asked to read a vignette that described an individual who witnesses harm done by Israelis to Palestinians. The participants were then asked to try and "enter" the role of that individual: "to try experiencing what he feels and thinks when he witnesses the described events." In each vignette, we manipulated the role of the actors (i.e., the Israelis committing harm to Palestinians) who could be either civilians or IDF soldiers and the role of the observer (i.e., the role-playing target) who could be either a civilian or an IDF soldier. The vignette was as follows:

Imagine you're a soldier serving [a civilian working in a private security company] in Judea and Samaria. As part of your duty, you're manning a position which overlooks a repair of a road that passes near Palestinian agricultural land. After a few weeks at the observation post, you see a rather frequent phenomenon: Soldiers [civilian security guards] who are responsible for the security of the work area, leave their position, approach the Palestinians who harvest in the nearby fields, and verbally and physically assaults them, sometimes causing even a severe physical injury that requires medical care.

Then the participants were asked about their willingness to reveal the observed event to sources as in the first study. The results showed two significant main effects for social roles of the persons involved in the event, that is, the content of the information. First, participants were significantly more inclined to self-censor the information when they played the role of a soldier observer in comparison to when they played the role of a civilian observer. Participants were also significantly more inclined to self-censor the information presented in the vignette when the actors in the scene were soldiers in comparison to civilians. This effect confirms a well-established phenomenon that soldiers and security forces have a unique and meaningful status in Israeli society, involved in an intractable conflict (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 1999). One can assume that damage to the soldier's image is strongly perceived as direct damage to the ingroup image and stance against rival groups because they perform a formal role representing the state.

In the third study, Israeli Jewish participants were seemingly asked to help a group of researchers in the validation process of an educational curriculum that deals with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Specifically, the participants were presented with a series of photos that portrayed this conflict: Half were conflict-supporting narratives presenting the ingroup (Israeli Jews) as moral and the outgroup (Palestinians) as vicious and immoral, and half were narrative-incongruent presenting opposite images. Each participant then was asked to decide whether or not each presented an image that should appear in the planned educational curriculum (i.e., willingness to self-censor the information) that would be presented to different audiences. Unlike study 1, the information recipients' conditions were manipulated as a between-subject variable. One-third of the participants were told that the curriculum they now validate would be presented to Jewish high-school student in Israel. Another third were told that it would be presented to Arab-Israeli high-school students. Finally, a third of the participants were told that the presentation would be presented to European high-school students who come to visit Israel.

The study unsurprisingly showed that willingness to self-censor is influenced by the type of information presented. Thus, participants in the study were more willing to self-censor official narrative-incongruent information in comparison to official narrative-congruent information. These findings show the willingness of the ingroup members to protect their image and to actively block information that sheds negative light on the ingroup. More specifically, when the information was narrative-incongruent, there was no difference across the information recipient's conditions—participants were generally quite willing to self-censor the information in front of all the potential recipients. However, when the information was narrative-congruent, there was a significant difference between the information recipients' conditions. Thus, participants showed significant higher levels of self-censorship in the Arab high-school condition in comparison to the European high-school condition. No significant differences were found between the Jewish-Israeli high-school condition and the two other information-recipients' conditions. It is possible that the participants realized that this information will not be received well by Arab-Israeli high-school students who have well-established views about the Israeli Jews.

In addition, in each of the studies, personal variables were employed. The analyses demonstrated that the readiness to self-censor was related to the following personal characteristics: right-wing

political orientation, adherence to the ethos of the conflict,⁷ and blind patriotism. This finding corresponds with the results of the research in the field of political ideology, which indicates that individuals who hold right-wing ideologies such as hawkish political orientation (Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Freund, 1994), strong adherence to the ethos conflict (Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin, & Zafran, 2012), and blind patriotism (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999) are characterized by glorification and defense of the ingroup have a stronger adherence to the group's norms and are less open to information that contradicts the dominant narratives (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).

In another experimental study by Shahar, Hameiri, and Bar-Tal (2014), participants were exposed to a story about Israel's violation of human rights of Palestinian children (which was revealed at that time) and were asked to evaluate the informer (Israelis who worked in the Israeli detention center) under different conditions. It was found that participants viewed ingroup members who informed a non-Israeli organization (UNICEF) about ingroup immoral acts more negatively than when they informed an Israeli organization (The Israeli Council for the Well-Being of Children). This study shows that in a society involved in intractable conflict, individuals who reveal information to outgroups are not liked and are viewed as harming the ingroup image and goals.

In sum, Figure 1 describes the process of decision making that an individual who is exposed to valid information goes through in deciding whether he or she will practice self-censorship in cases when the information has implications for a society.

The figure notes that when a person receives valid new information that is unexposed to the public and has to decide whether to reveal it or not, the decision is affected by the previously described four categories of variables: personal characteristics, context of the society, type of information, and circumstantial factors. In deciding what to do, the person considers the implications of revealing the information to him/herself, the other persons in his/her immediate social environment (for example, friends, coworkers, family members), the influence on the groups, the effect on the particular societal belief for which the information is relevant and a third party who may be affected by the revelation of the information. In this consideration, the person calculates subjective costs and rewards for each decision and then deals with the dilemma that arises, resolving the dissonance. The outcome of these personal-subjective considerations determines whether a person will reveal the information, to whom and what part or the whole, or whether she or he will practice self-censorship.

Consequences of Self-Censorship

Self-censorship practiced by society members has a number of effects that can be detected on the individual and collective levels. With regard to the negative effects on the individual level, self-

⁷ *Ethos of conflict* is defined as the configuration of shared central societal beliefs that provide a particular dominant orientation to a society at present and for the future in the contexts of intractable conflict (Bar-Tal, 2000, 2007, 2013). It is composed of eight major themes about issues related to the conflict, the ingroup, and its adversary: (1) Societal beliefs about the justness of one's own goals, which outline the contested goals, indicate their crucial importance and provide their explanations and rationales; (2) Societal beliefs about security stress the importance of personal safety and national survival and outline the conditions for their achievement; (3) Societal beliefs of positive collective self-image concern the ethnocentric tendency to attribute positive traits, values, and behavior to one's own society; (4) Societal beliefs of victimization concern the self-presentation of the ingroup as the victim of the conflict; (5) Societal beliefs of delegitimizing the opponent concern beliefs that deny the adversary's humanity; (6) Societal beliefs of patriotism generate attachment to the country and society, by propagating loyalty, love, care, and sacrifice; (7) Societal beliefs of unity refer to the importance of ignoring internal conflicts and disagreements during intractable conflicts to unite the society's forces in the face of an external threat; and (8) finally, Societal beliefs of peace refer to peace as the ultimate desire of the society.

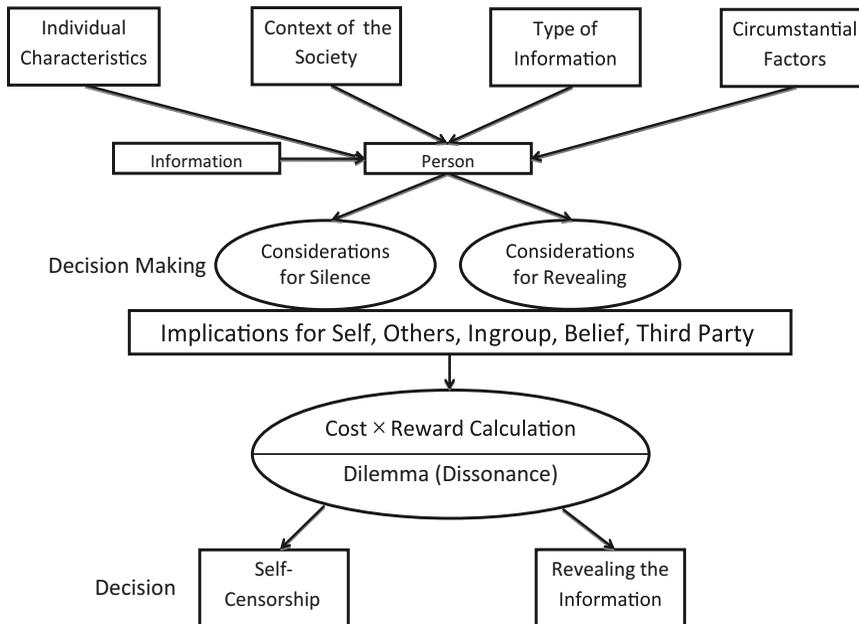


Figure 1. Process of decision making to self-censor.

ensorship may cause personal distress as the person may be aware that the withheld information is relevant for the well-being of the society, or that norms of free flow of information are violated. In addition, the content of the information may itself be stressful, and withholding it prevents healing or dealing with the traumatic experience (Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Kubey & Peluso, 1990). Individuals may feel guilt and shame for not revealing the information which may come from different sources, evoked by moral values, patriotic feelings, and/or adherence to certain values.

On the collective level, self-censorship blocks relevant information and thus decreases access to information and reduces the free flow of information. It leads to ignorance of the public on issues that may have importance for the society and later leads to impaired decisions because of the missing information. It impoverishes public debate. It harms transparency and critical views, and it blocks changes as well as reinforcing reproduction of particular dogmas, norms, and practices because of withheld information that could change them. It may also lead to moral deterioration because it prevents information about societal misdeeds (Shinar Levanon, in press).

A study by Bar-Tal, Hameiri, and Shahar (2013) investigated perceived consequences of practicing self-censorship. We provided a vignette about an anonymous state in South America called X (no name was noted), supplying the same information about this state to all the participants, but in addition, we told half of them that the state had a norm of self-censorship (describing it properly in line with the definition)—and we informed the other half that it had a norm of openness. Participants were then asked to evaluate the particular state on different characteristics related to societal consequences. The results showed that participants noted liabilities when self-censorship was instituted. They noted that a state with self-censorship has significantly fewer democratic values, less openness, and less pluralism than the state without it. Thus, it can be assumed that when society members decide to adopt self-censorship they are also aware of the costs that a society may pay for their practice.

Nevertheless, there are also positive consequences of self-censorship. It allows maintenance of a positive image and a positive social identity, prevents potential harm to the ingroup from outside parties, and increases unity and solidarity by preventing disagreements, controversies, and schisms.

Those are important consequences that often influence society members to practice self-censorship and to withhold what they consider information that may harm the ingroup.

Measurement of Self-Censorship

The challenging problem is how to measure self-censorship since not everyone has had this experience on a societal level, and it is very difficult to create a situation which will elicit this behavior in a realistic way. Therefore, we began to use approximate measures by assessing the readiness and appropriateness of using self-censorship in a certain situation. In the first study by Hameiri, Sharvit, Bar-Tal, Shahar, and Halperin (in press), the individual factors that contribute to the functioning of self-censorship as a sociopsychological barrier to conflict resolution were investigated (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011). The rationale for this study was that self-censorship is viewed often by authorities and segments of a society as a necessary sociopsychological mechanism that protects the ingroup in the context of intractable conflict by blocking the dissemination of information that is perceived as detrimental to the society's goals and interests. Its practice enables the maintenance of the society's dominant conflict-supporting narrative and prevents the disclosure and dissemination of alternative information that contradicts the dominant narrative. Thus, in order to prevent its disclosure and dissemination, societies resort not only to methods of official censorship and other societal mechanisms (Bar-Tal, 2013; Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zehngut, 2014; Kelman, 2007), but also propagate norms of practicing self-censorship and use social sanctions to enforce them (Bar-Tal, 2013). For example, in Israel, Minister of Culture Limor Livnat openly said "I, who am opposed to censorship, call on all of you (film directors) to [conduct] self-censorship" (*Haaretz*, February 28, 2013). Under such conditions, these norms are internalized by some society members. Accordingly, self-censorship in times of conflict can be viewed as a sociopsychological barrier to peacemaking. Along with the biases in information processing investigated in previous research (Bar-Tal, 2013; Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011), self-censorship should be seen as a barrier that has societal implications. By blocking alternative information and allowing the maintenance of conflict-supporting narratives, it contributes directly to the continuation of the intractable conflicts. Society members in these cases, on the one hand, voluntarily, intentionally, and consciously prevent the diffusion of new information that may provide an alternative view of the conflict, the adversary, and the goals of the ingroup or the conflict, even if they believe that this information is valid. On the other hand, they support this practice and sanction those who violate this norm, and in this way, they help to maintain self-censorship.

It was a longitudinal study conducted among a large sample of Jews in Israel between February 2012 and January 2013, during which another cycle of violence in the Gaza Strip erupted in November 2012: the Israeli Operation *Pillar of Defense* (OPD). In this study, a number of measures of support to use self-censorship were employed: *General Support for Self-Censorship* (for example, "The media should publish reliable information on immoral deeds that governments or militaries conduct, even if this might harm the society or state in which this information is being published"); *Support for Self-Censorship During Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in the Gaza Strip* (for example, "To what extent do you think that the soldiers who participated in OPD should [have] pass[ed] on reliable information regarding harm to Palestinian civilians?"); and *Support for Self-Censorship in Other Nations* measuring participants' support for self-censorship used in other nations, such as Russia and the United States, rather than Israel (e.g., "*The media in other nations, such as Russia and the United States, should publish reliable information regarding immoral deeds done by the government*").

In addition, three different predictors of support for self-censorship were assessed, representing specific conflict-supporting beliefs and general worldviews that each taps a different aspect of a conservative orientation. The first investigated antecedent was *right-wing authoritarianism* (RWA), which refers to a type of personality that advocates a conservative view of the world, including

adherence to traditional values and closure to new ideas (Altemeyer, 1996). The second antecedent was *ethnocentrism*, which denotes the tendency to accept the ingroup and reject outgroups (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2012). The third selected antecedent was *siege mentality*, which reflects a generalized societal belief that the whole world is against the ingroup, deep feelings of threat, and a sense of collective victimhood (see Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992).

Finally, two variables were chosen to serve as consequences of self-censorship support for conciliatory measures toward the Palestinians, namely negotiations with the Palestinian leadership and provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza residents. These two variables represent a complementary view on the conflict. While the first indicates the level of the willingness to embark on the road to peace, indicating openness because a change of the conflict-supporting narratives is required (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011), the second reflects the strong adherence to the conflict-supporting narratives and negative emotions that support hurting the adversary when humanitarian aid is refused (Halperin & Gross, 2011).

The findings showed that armed confrontation significantly increases support for self-censorship in comparison to times of relative calm. Support for self-censorship thus aims to protect the society in conflict by blocking the dissemination of information viewed as harming a society that is threatened by the rival group and is coping with vital challenges in a violent conflict. In addition, the findings revealed that personal characteristics (e.g., authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, siege mentality) predicted support for self-censorship, which, in turn, mediated the effect of personal characteristics on support for peace negotiations with the Palestinians and for providing humanitarian aid to the suffering residents of Gaza. The findings thus indicate that support for self-censorship serves, in this sense, as one of the expressions of conservative political ideology that supports the maintenance of the conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013).

Indeed, our findings demonstrated that general support for self-censorship assessed during the violence predicted reduced support for negotiations and humanitarian aid to the Palestinians three months after the operation. This result remained significant even after controlling for the outcome variables assessed at an earlier time. These results suggest that support for self-censorship is not merely a by-product of an ongoing conflict, but a significant process that acts as a barrier to conflict resolution. It is an outcome of individual characteristics and societal circumstances that leads to human stagnation. It is a mechanism of closure that aims to block information which may potentially shed new light on the conflict and the rival and thus lead to a change of views by society members and possibly a change of policies regarding the conflict.

Of interest is the finding that Israeli Jews did not support self-censorship in other societies, such as the United States or Russia, probably realizing that it harms the functioning of the democratic system by preventing free flow of information. This finding reflects double standards, whereby individuals expect other persons and groups to uphold certain moral standards, while excusing themselves and their own groups from upholding the same principles on the basis of various rationalizations (Ashmore, Bird, Del-Boca, & Vanderet, 1979; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). Individuals also apply different standards of judgment while evaluating similar behaviors by their own society versus another society. While the behavior of the ingroup is judged positively, the same behavior by the other group is often judged negatively (Oskamp, 1965; Sande, Goethals, Ferrari, & Worth, 1989).

Eventually we decided to develop a concept and construct a general scale that could assess attitudes towards self-censorship in different social settings. We developed a scale called the self-censorship orientation (SCO) with the assumption that those who support the use of self-censorship are also more likely to practice it (Sharvit, Bar-Tal, Hameiri, Shahar, Zafran, & Raviv, 2015). After generating about 50 items and asking judges to evaluate them, we gave the selected items to a nationwide sample of Israeli Jewish adults with other comparable scales. Eventually, at the end of the process, factor analysis yielded two opposite factors: a self-censorship factor with six items (for example, "Providing credible information which presents our group in a negative light to the media weakens

the group's ability to endure"; "People who disclose credible information to external sources, which exposes my group to criticism should be condemned"; "Exposing credible information which presents our group in a negative light is playing into the hands of our enemies") and a "breaking the silence" factor with eight items (for example, "If I encountered problematic conduct among my group members, I would feel responsible for bringing that information to light"; "It is important to expose failures/errors by group members in order to learn from them and improve"; "I am concerned that concealing credible information about wrongdoings in my group will lead us to moral decline").

In the validating phase of the research, we found that the self-censorship factor was negatively related to support for abstract democratic values, constructive patriotism, and support for universalistic values. The breaking-the-silence factor was on the one hand related positively to support for abstract democratic values, constructive patriotism, and support for universalistic values, and, on the other hand, was negatively and moderately related to conformity, RWA, blind patriotism, and support for group narrative (FENCE),⁸ and negatively and weakly related to identification with the ingroup. Finally, and more importantly, the breaking-the-silence factor significantly predicted readiness to present on the EU website images portraying Israelis as aggressors and/or Palestinians as victims. The study supported the proposed conceptualization of the concept *support for self-censorship*, demonstrated its measurability, showed its uniqueness and relations to other similar concepts, and established its importance for predicting different types of attitudes and behaviors.

Conclusion

This article has introduced the concept of self-censorship as well as proposed a conceptual framework for its understanding. It is a unique and important phenomenon that social psychology has relatively disregarded. The article has limited the scope of the concept to exposure of information, placing expression of an opinion beyond the definition. The conceptual framework has located the concept within a societal analysis of freedom of information, freedom of expression, and free flow of information, which are all crucial ingredients for developing democracy and a well-functioning society.

But self-censorship has two faces as described. It often leads to public ignorance, impoverishes the public debate, harms transparency, leads to moral deterioration, impairs decisions, blocks change and reproduction of norms, ideas, and beliefs that may even be detrimental to a society. But it also has positive functions as it enables retention of positive self-collective image, positive social identity, and in some cases, even strengthens solidarity and cohesiveness of the group. Moreover, it is recognized that in some cases self-censorship is required for maintaining security, preserving the well-being of a society, and safeguarding the privacy of society members.

I recognize the dialectical approach to this important social phenomenon. On the one hand, many well-documented cases have indicated that self-censorship was detrimental to the society and prevented exposure of information that was essential for its well-functioning—as, for example, thousands knew about the futility of the Vietnam War but only Daniel Ellsberg and few others had the courage to break the silence and tell the nation about the lies of American politicians and military commanders. Thousands practiced self-censorship to prevent information about atrocities committed by the Belgians in the Congo, the British in Kenya, or the Dutch in Indonesia. In Spain, as previously noted, individuals still practice self-censorship about the dark period of Franco rule, and Israeli officials openly encourage artists, academics, and journalists practice self-censorship to cover Israeli moral misdeeds carried out against Palestinians. The same detrimental effect exists with regard to

⁸ The scale "firmly entrenched narrative closure" (FENCE) assesses the value that individuals place on protecting and defending their group's historical narrative in the context of an intergroup conflict (Klar & Baram, 2016).

self-censorship that covers corruption or other types of misdeeds. But it is also clear, on the other hand, that there is a need for self-censorship when information can harm the society in the present or in the future. Especially in the realm of security, society members practice wide-ranging self-censorship to protect their nation. But borders are very blurred as to what should be exposed and what should be kept secret with self-censorship. The recent case of the information revealed by Edward Snowden about massive violations of civil rights in the United States and other countries by the U.S. National Security Agency provides evidence of how grey and equivocal the use of imposed self-censorship is.

Self-censorship in this framework is defined as being employed only when there are no formal rules that prevent exposure of information—but, as noted, people also break rules for patriotic reasons. They care about the well-being of their society exactly because the borderline determining what information serves the well-being of the society and what does not often depend upon the subjective view of the leaders who are sometimes not sufficiently supported by hard evidence. Citizens must constantly be on their guard. Leaders in different collective entities are often deeply interested in preventing a free flow of information for reasons irrelevant to the functioning of the entity. In many cases, they just want to cover their misdeeds or poor decisions. Thus, it is the free flow of information that serves as an important mechanism to stop many malpractices by the leaders and authorities. Self-censorship as a norm widely practiced and supported is an obstacle to this desirable state of affairs.

It is clear that one of the most salient antecedents to the practice of self-censorship is societal-political context. Specifically, it is possible to formulate at least two rules: The first one says that the more authoritarian is the system by preventing the free flow of information, the more society members as individuals and in different roles as gatekeepers will practice self-censorship. The second one says that the more society members feel their individual and collective security threatened, the more they practice self-censorship to protect their group. The first rule implies practice of self-censorship because of personal fear to be sanctioned by the authorities, and in the second case the practice is based on patriotic feelings towards the group. But in a number of cases, the two different contexts are sometimes related. Authoritarian regimes may engage in violent conflicts that lead to feelings of insecurity by society members. In addition, societies that are engaged for a long time in a violent conflict necessarily develop lines of authoritarianism because they try to limit the free flow of information in order to mobilize society members to participate in the conflict. Finally, I do recognize that individuals differ in their personal characteristics, and therefore there are also individual differences in the practice of self-censorship and in its support. We have indications that individuals with more conservative views practice and support more self-censorship. These individuals try to preserve the present system and/or ideological views and/or situation and thus support blocking information that may shake the foundations of the particular system, views, or situation. In both cases, however, practice of self-censorship and support of this practice have serious societal consequences. Necessarily, blocking information leads to ignorance and intolerance, impoverishes public debates, causes a lack of transparency and accountability, and serves as a fruitful setting for immoral deeds.

There are many different motivations that lead individuals in different organizations and groups to practice self-censorship. They can be classified in general categories: Those that are based on interest to avoid personal sanctions and gain personal rewards and those that are based on the concern for the well-being of the collective, mostly the ingroup. It is possible to widen the last category to protection of ideas, ideologies, or religions. People with their different personal characteristics and living in very different contexts vary with their specific motivations to practice and support self-censorship. But it is possible to assume that it is a widely spread sociopsychological phenomenon that can be found wherever human beings live in groups. The recent book *Self-Censorship in Different Contexts: Theory and Research* that I edited with Rafi Nets-Zehngut and Keren Sharvit opens a new window to explore this phenomenon in different systems, settings, and contexts such as family, organizations, mass media, education, violent conflicts, security forces, and academia. With this article and the book, I hope that the academic and public discussion about self-censorship, its enforcement by formal and

informal agents, the needs and motivations of those who practice it and those who socially enforce it, and the conditions that facilitate it and its boundaries will contribute to the strengthening of democratic societies and how they function.

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