Palestine online: cyber Intifada and the construction of a virtual community 2001-2005

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Chapter 2: Technological & Political Infrastructures

2.1 Introduction

The place and the timing of this research reflected two crucial developments that eventually fused: (1) regional instability resulting from occupation and war, and (2) the explosion of ICT ventures. To get a sense of how the availability of the internet as a new mass medium excited many Palestinians, we need only search Google to be overwhelmed by the enormous amount of Palestinian online forums, mailing lists, and websites. The most fiercely debated topic on the internet during my research concerned pro-Israeli/anti-Palestinian coverage in mainstream media.

Exaggerated media views, such as Palestinian mothers sending their children to martyrdom or volunteer suicide bombers that are promised many virgins in paradise were some examples of how hegemonic discourses function. The negative characterization of Palestinians and the positive bias in favor of the Israeli narrative are obvious in news coverage analysis. Many believed that this type of bias limit international support for the Palestinian cause by which foreign governments can side with Israel. The availability of mass electronic and internet media therefore constituted a crucial improvement for Palestinian resistance in 2000/2001. The effective appropriation of modern media technologies by Palestinians reached a peak after the outbreak of the Intifada in 2000. During an interview in Gaza in 2002 Ahmed Abu Marzouk told me:

During the first six months (of the Intifada), we saw an extensive growth [of Internet utilization] because people were stuck at home, bored, and frustrated. The Internet also became the only source of accurate news, and of chatting, which is very important because people needed more means of communication to talk and express themselves.

According to information in the Israeli and Palestinian press, the Palestinian firm with the most profits in 2001/2 was PalTel telecommunication. Due to the increasing forced immobility, closures, and curfews – and despite them, the Palestinian community relied even more on new-media to stay informed on the outbreak of the Intifada; meanwhile, the international community was tapping into Palestinian sources for alternative (i.e., locally produced) information. In addition to the economic and political decision-making of the PNA to infuse the Telecom sector,

34 There are many examples, such as the account of a former conservative journalist/reporter at Fox News having been reprimanded for refusing to say ‘homicide bombings’ instead of the already subjective ‘suicide bombings’ (in 2004 documentary "Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism"). And the book ‘Het Zijn Net Mensen’ (They are like (normal) people) by Joris Luyendijk (2005) deconstructs how the Western media contributed in dehumanizing Palestinians.

35 Abu Marzouk was an internet expert and director of Palestine Internet Services in Gaza.
socio-political factors also critically contributed to the rise of internet usage by Palestinians. Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz stated: “…perhaps because of the roadblocks and transportation difficulties, people are using the telephone more”\textsuperscript{36} Palestinians began to have a voice and face, but they were also revealing their everyday conditions. They communicated their own political and cultural message to the ‘outside’ world because they regarded Western media to be biased about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This bias, resulting from either intentional distortions or unconscious prejudice/ignorance, made Palestinians easy targets for propaganda. Sometimes, even the terms ‘Palestinians’ and ‘Palestine’ is controversial.\textsuperscript{37}

September 11, 2001 was like a magnifying glass: the fusion of technology and politics made awareness of the potentials of ICT even more necessary. The development of mass media created new patterns in the evolution of media and communication technologies, both affecting the synthesis of community participation. The various “tales of internet” sketched in the first chapter suggest two ways of understanding ICT. The most widely disseminated is a top-down effect that emanates from corporate marketing strategies; the alternative tale emerges from the activities of diasporic groups on the internet interacting with each other and their countries of origin (Franklin (2001). The internet is a space for solidarity and empowerment and a tool for agency and resistance.

This chapter will outline the various concepts elaborated in the subsequent chapter. The first section presents my analysis and understanding of virtual space/territorial place, resistance/oppression, and mobility/immobility. Despite the empowering characteristics of internet; the disempowering capitalist hegemony and materiality of technology need to be discussed as well. The second section of this chapter aims at offering a brief history of ICT in the Palestinian context and situates the internet within an offline Palestinian (embedded) perspective.

2.2 Framing the ‘Tensions’

In Chapter One I introduced three tensions: mobility/immobility, space/place, and resistance/oppression. The three themes present the theoretical frameworks of this study. I do not offer an exhaustive (disciplinary) description of the theoretical debates, but rather refer to these key concepts from a grounded approach and as I understand them from the perspectives of social reality and technology. The first tension is the issue of mobility. I understand mobility in relation to the offline realities of Palestinian immobility, diaspora, and exile. The virtual space/territorial place dichotomy, the second tension, deals with concepts of nation-state and trans-national identity and their

\textsuperscript{36} By Danny Rubinstein in Ha’aretz. Survival Strategy. Tuesday, February 5, 2002. This is also a relevant indication because at the time the telephone connection was often used for internet access.
\textsuperscript{37} During one of the first academic conferences I attended, one participant repeatedly objected to my use of the term Palestine. I discovered that also a discussion from a Palestinian perspective is a problem for some.
relation to virtual communities. Closely linked to the issue of nation-state/transnational communities, is grassroots resistance. In the third tension I question how (in the Palestinian context of occupation and oppression) dominant public spaces are contested and counter-public spheres designed. By explaining how resistance can be understood, I offer a glimpse of what virtual grassroots agency looks like and how it affects (or is affected by) the people involved.

“Oslo” failed for many reasons, but fundamentally because the Israeli colonial occupation continued with structural and full control of Palestinian life. This un-equal relation between the occupier and occupied led to the al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000. A deeper frustration that reaches across all sections in (trans)national Palestinian community, is the question of mobility; or better formulated: the lack of mobility and forced mobility.

Ideal Mobility—Colonial Immobility: Place, Nation, State

The 1948 Palestine-Israel war is known to Israelis as ‘The War of Independence’, but for Palestinians it will forever be the Nakba, the ‘catastrophe’. Alongside the creation of the State of Israel, the end of the war led to one of the largest forced migrations in modern history. Around a million people were expelled from their homes at gunpoint, civilians were massacred, and hundreds of Palestinian villages deliberately destroyed. Though the truth about the mass expulsion has been systematically distorted and suppressed, had it taken place in the twenty-first century it could only have been called ‘ethnic cleansing’. Pappe (2006)

Whereas analyses regarding mobility may cover that of people, ideas, and commodities, mobility in a Palestinian context refers mostly to people’s experiences born of forced migration. The frustration about mobility is a consequence of the refugee problem and the fate of Palestinians who are displaced or ethnically cleansed since 1948 (Aruri 2001). Such experiences of mobility may differ according to historical timing, class, and reflect different diasporic groups—stateless refugees, political exiles, and successful expatriates. The remigration of Palestinian elite classes to after the Oslo agreement has also resulted in a number of ICT specialists returning to Palestine. In due course these successful returnees crafted the intellectual and technological backbone of the internet in Palestine. A majority of Palestinians that represent ‘transnational mobility’ are the result of forced mobility after deportation during the 1948 Nakba, as depicted by Pappe in the opening quote; as well as the 1967 military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. In other words, to understand the issue of Palestinian mobility, we must grasp the reality of Palestinian refugees and the notions of diaspora and displacement.

The Palestinian diaspora community can roughly be divided in three categories: refugees with travel documents (mainly Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and former Iraq), nationals of convenience (mostly those with temporary Jordanian passports),
and PA/Palestinian passport holders (i.e. travel documents in West Bank and Gaza).38 Statelessness and changing concepts of citizenship are sensitive issues, especially vis-à-vis the historical rights of the Palestinian diaspora and the political and economic responsibilities of host countries. Shiblek shows that the crucial question regarding stateless Palestinian communities is protection.39 The exclusion of Palestinian refugees as part of the general international refugee policy (i.e. exclusion is basically based on political grounds) undermines the effort to gain equality and a form collective community.

The forced displacement of Palestinians in 1948 resulted in what is considered one of the most difficult refugee problems today. In 1967, when Israel occupied the remaining West Bank and Gaza, thousands of Palestinians were forced to leave their homes and villages again resulting in another flow of refugees makes internally displace Palestinians part of the diaspora as well. The relative autonomy of Oslo’s 1993 agreement ended abruptly in a (re)occupation in 2000; it fuelled not only violence, but also (often online) discussions about what it means to be ‘Palestinian’ and definitions of ‘diaspora’ and ‘refugee’. Though ‘diaspora’ might also assume a certain ‘voluntarism’, this is not applicable to exiled Palestinians who are not permitted to return or even visit Palestine. Only a minority of Palestinians who lived in the West or were part of Arafat’s Fatah cadre managed to return to Palestine after Oslo.40 Thus it is complicated to discuss ‘the’ Palestinian diaspora since Palestinians are dispersed all over the world, and (fragmented) by the expulsion of more than three quarter of its population. Moreover, political differences in status between Palestinians related to state-politics are itself a product of historic/demographic circumstances (see Chapter Three).

What kind of connectedness and mobility do new-media technologies such as the internet enable in this context of exile and immobility? This question is related to the (assumed) transformation of the social-political effects of ICT processes that led to for example ‘network societies’. Understanding the connection between the internet and the production of virtual space is crucial to our (theoretical) engagement with internet cultures (Terranova 2004). Transnational mass media developments are introduced as a culture of virtuality characterized by a timeless time and a placeless space, in Castells’s Trilogy (1996, 1997, 1998). The analyses are driven by the hypothesis of a ‘new type’ of society and focus on the dynamic junction between flows of virtual space and physical space. Castells presented the new type of society by delineating various (dialectical) oppositions between the internet and the self. People,

38 See (Rempel and Shiblek) Forced Migration Review special on Palestinian refugees (no. 26, reference 2996).
39 Enforcing this reality are the restrictive laws based on the reactionary principle of jus sanguine, nationality by descent, that statelessness can be inherited and passed on through generations.
40 Many returnees from the West with EU or US passports can enter Palestine with a tourist visa. In 2006 many Palestinians were refused entry however, as in the case of Sam Bahour We Can’t Go Home Again. http://www.amin.org/look/amin/en.mpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=7&NrArticle=37435&NrIssue=1&NrSection=3. 09 October 2006, on Arab Media Internet Network.
commodities, information, and ideas (i.e., transnational globalization), seem to be interrelated with mass-mediated networks and trespassing state-structures.41

The public sphere seems to have adopted a ‘real’ and a ‘virtual’ character as a result of electronic communications and globalization. Yet the internet needs to be embedded in the structures of diasporic/exile realities. For instance, while it may be possible to modify internet technology for diasporic communities, for members of a diasporic group the internet cannot reverse or escape the larger patterns of social realities (Dawson 2003:1). If we wish to consider the consistency of computer-mediated diasporic communities, we have to deal with conceptual issues of immobility which also relate to virtual community. I compare physical and virtual mobility (Chapter Three) because being denied the choice to move or maintain personal face-to-face relations with friends and family impacts the meaning of ‘nation’ and ‘national community’.

Transnationalism and mobility are interrelated concepts—transnationalism perceives mobility and migration as characteristic elements—and these concepts are sometimes fused with the notion of virtual mobility. Nations are concurrently affected by transnational influences and the development of mass media. Transnationalism refers to long distance networks, including multinational capitalist enterprises, international political movements, and diasporic communities. The development of ICT (and internet access) is one of the clearest novelties linked to new political-economic systems of globalization. Having said that, the concept of transnationalism is ambiguous, representing disciplinary differences from emancipatory to hegemonic dispositions. In Transnationalism from Below Smith and Guarnizo (1998) theorize transnational processes and explain that we should understand this as a complex process that needs to be studied from different levels of analyses; seen through the prism of the local, national, and global. As they argued, transnationalism is characterized by the intersection of migration processes, globalization of capitalism, and technological revolution (17-24). The intersectionality of the concept of transnationalism also confirms that transnational identity is not evidently linked to growing mobility. In fact, the problem is that, as Eagleton notes, “the rich have mobility while the poor have locality. Or rather, the poor have locality until the rich get their hands on it” (2004:22).

Transnationalism does not prove that mobility coincides with a decreasing value of national identity. This important analysis of mobility echoes Castells above proposition and relate to the debate concerning shifts from modern (i.e. ‘outdated’) nation-states to postmodern communities.42 It is argued that because of these transnational shifts nation-states have lost sovereignty and power. Appadurai observes that communication through electronic media, like the television and cinema, led to the formation of ‘communities of sentiment’ (1996:8). In this view, the nation is

41 The suggestion of a free flow of networks is striking. But identity/self is dialectically related with society and influenced by political/economic state affairs. Hence, the conclusions that new social structures lead to a decrease of state structures are not easily substantiated.
42 For a discussion about the theoretical inputs of Giddens see Vertovec (1999).
considered transnational but also in competition with the state. However, the (emotional) power and (political) sovereignty of nation-states as such, are not decreasing. So while acknowledging the importance of change and internal contradictions, the notion of nation-state as an outdated concept is like throwing away the baby with the bathwater; it easily gives in to the postmodern view that the state is itself a redundant concept. On the contrary, states are entangled with political and economic power, perhaps now more than ever. Within the ‘new’ globalized capitalist system, transnational enterprises are protected and governed by their companies’ state (interests). The direct war in Iraq and Afghanistan abroad (and the indirect attack on civil liberties at home) illustrate how states practice their power in the name of the nation. These international processes led to more policing of subaltern classes, as well as an increase of nationalism and Islamophobia (Fekete 2006a 2006b). Furthermore, this tendency contributes to the politics of coercion, and limits the potential for collective resistance by the different (sometimes competing) subordinate classes within states. These social impacts call to attention our understanding of nation-states with regards to national identity.

Baumann argues that there has never been a nation-state that was not multicultural, and that in fact a culturally homogenous nation-state with one language only exists in schoolbooks, manuals for the military, and in the media (2007:5). This criticism touches on a very important point regarding the failure to forcibly integrate (i.e. assimilate) communities/cultures in order to produce nation-states. His important criticism is a reminder that the army, education system and media are merged with nation-state ideology. They continue to animate (imagined) ideals of ethnic superiority and national canons. The state is “far from dead as protagonists of capitalist globalization need the nation-state to control the international market” (Baumann 2007:5). Thus, whereas the (dominant-national) media is the instrument being challenged through the utilization of new technologies, this study shows that the failure to mould nations into a solitary state does not mean that states fail to monopolize the necessary vehicles. State policy and everyday (community) practices (sometimes also internalized by minority groups) derived from these logics therefore do exist; nationalist idealization/imagination is alive and kicking. As Baumann continues to argue:

Populism, xenophobia and radical exclusion sealed this wholesale abandonment of political, civic, and civil values in the face of globalization. At present, the state is again being peddled, by losers and demagogues, as one nation, as if the state were an ethno-national organism; the nation is peddled as one culture, as if citizenship were a matter of culture; and culture is reduced to birth or descent …” (9).

But why do diasporic/oppressed communities also ascribe strong meaning to national inspired frameworks? If xenophobia is a reminder of the top-down/‘Western’ framework of nation-state, another important reference and reminder is related to a progressive/bottom-up process of state building/national identity. Eriksen (1993) described how diasporic national identities particularly relates to non-state (contested)
groups as Palestinians. These (often oppressed) communities function as ‘proto-nations’ that strongly hold on to a national identity. Palestinians are one of the largest stateless communities in the world (fourth/fifth generation since 1948), certainly not enjoying transnational mobility. These parallel/uneven developments need to be included in a critical deconstruction of the ‘global village’. Brian Larkin’s (2002) use of parallel modernities is an alternative way to link immobility, transnationalism, and imagined communities, and to describe the worlds of those who are not mobile but nonetheless (through media) participate in the imagined realities as part of their lives.

A new understanding of imagined community (since the growing use of electronic media) reformulates these alternatives. The birth of the “imagined community” of a nation happened through early mass media forms such as the novel and newspaper. Although rarely referred to in discussions about imagined communities, these new mediations were also shaped by local travel experiences. Early colonial administrators’ territorial traversals and print capitalism in the Americas were important, Anderson (1981) refers to the ‘carriers’ of modern nation-states (Chapter One). Many studies have focused on the impact of European (colonial) history on the construction of modern capitalist nation-states. It is also interesting to examine historical examples that are not per-se products of (colonial) capitalism but hint at a different process and construction of national identity in order to understand the progressive alternative of state building.

CLR James’ (1980) narrative is one of the most inspiring references. The San Domingo revolution brought an end to an improbable chapter in history when Toussaint L’Ouverture’s forces broke the chains of colonial slavery. Historically concurrent with the French and American Revolutions, though rarely referred to in the literature dealing with the birth of (imagined) nation-states, the Haitian Revolution established one of the first independent modern nation-states. Of the three this was the only revolution that forced an unconditional application of the principle to affirm natural, inalienable rights for all human beings (Hallward 2004). Political and national mobilizations are here based on anti-slavery/anti-colonial motives and identity associated with anti-colonial struggles. Rather than color/descent or competition-motivated nationalism, membership was based on shared suffering and struggle. This dynamic defines the concepts of nation and state differently:

The odds it had to overcome are evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved. The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement.

It showed a unique and alternative framework: The San Domingo revolution in 1791, two years after the French revolution, lasted 12 years until the defeat of Bonaparte’s expedition in 1803 resulted in the establishment of ‘the first Negro State of Haiti’ (C.L.R. James 1980:ix).

For many Palestinians, the symbolic expression of national identity is a political affair and not a self-evident liberty. Thus there is a need to broaden our
critical understanding of nation-state formation (the conception thereof and its related struggles) in researching Palestine. This need arises from the assumption that the division of humankind into national entities is ‘natural’, and that the right of self-determination is validated when a community can demonstrate its (early) self-awareness/identification as a nation (Sayigh 1997:xiii). Therefore, until elementary rights are won, it is rather abstract to deny the value of national territory, borders, or constitutions. And according to Schulz (1999), the Palestinian case is unique regarding the construction of national identity because of colonial occupation and forced immobility/diaspora.

Dominant power structures provided a political impulse in the evolution of Palestinian national identity and the organizational dynamic of its armed struggle. Schulz argues that Palestinian nationalism is a result of (everyday) violent confrontations with Zionism and, later, the state of Israel, as well as the product of nationalist discourses of (exiled) Palestinian political elites.43 Thus, apart from the top-down nationalism criticized above, this anti-colonial nationalism is what I recognised in the online traversals amongst many Palestinians (see Chapter Four). Moreover, the Palestinian colonial experience is unique because the existence of Palestinians as a people or nation was/is denied. Zionist groups that gained influence during the British colonial dominance of Mandate Palestine particularly instrumented this representation of Palestinians (Chapter One).

Palestinian uprisings, from 1936 during the British Mandate to the last Intifada in 2000, affect the Palestinian sense of self and character of the Palestinian struggle. Palestinian evolution of politics, ideological discourses, and organizational structures, were also connected to armed struggle (Sayigh 1997). It is in this historical context that my references to national identity in Chapter Three and Four should be understood. Before I discuss the broader struggles and resistance, I wish to understand how state/national perceptions relate to place/space and virtual community.

Virtual Space & Territorial Place: Identity, Community, Networks

Perhaps cyberspace, with its capacity to externalize our innermost fantasies in all their inconsistency, opens up to the artistic practice a unique possibility to stage, to “act out”, the fantasmatic support of our existence, up to the fundamental “sadomasochistic” fantasy that cannot ever be subjectivized… Far from enslaving us to these fantasies and turning us into desubjectivized, blind puppets, it enables us to treat them in a playful way and thus to adopt toward them a minimum of distance. Zizek (1998)

The concepts of space and place, central to understanding the geographies of the internet, raise many questions as confirmed in the previous section. How up to date

43 For more on this history see Schulz’ (1999) The reconstruction of Palestinian Nationalism: between revolution and statehood.
are the frameworks of nation, place, and identity in terms of transnational media technologies? And how can techno-capitalism influence internet mediated communities and identity? Is virtual space another kind of place, or does this ‘different’ type of space imply a new kind of interactivity? Geographers have long studied the twin concept space/place, which has become synonymous with the twin concept offline/online. Approximately a decade ago, Adams (1997) had already discerned geographically related metaphors for internet spaces: ‘electronic frontier’, ‘cyber space’, ‘information highway’. Space and place are evocative (yet sometimes complex) terms for understanding the tensions between ‘place’ as territory/state and the loose, collective ‘space’ as imaginary nation-state. In other words, space, place, and (nation) state are closely intertwined.

The affiliation between virtual space and national space is critical: binary views and either-or evaluations of place vs. space or nation vs. state are thus rarely helpful. Viewing the nation (-state) as an ethnically/culturally bounded entity therefore reflects a static perceptive and is considered in many fields of study ahistoric and essentialist. An important reality is that societies imagine/identify itself through the (construction and consumption of) mass media. Although an emerging ‘post-industrial’ capitalism has been characterized by the decline of the state and the increasing power of the international market, nation-state institutions remain extremely important, as illustrated by military responses after 9/11 (Kellner 2002:290).

Nation-states are ideologically constructed and can shape national identities as suggested before. This study is concerned with understanding virtual space and identity as it is shaped by particular social-economic histories and contexts, set within a particular reality and objective conditions. These material conditions may or may not migrate from offline settings to online representations. They usually migrate to varying degrees, depending on the participant’s personal motivation, class, and technological access. Furthermore, online participation is not a static process but susceptible to change. Like offline events, online experiences are simultaneously inspired by political, private, and community concerns, which means that multiple motivations and identities occupy similar online activities. An important element in the debate on the decline of territorial importance caused by internet technology is the emergence of virtual communities. A requirement for a virtual type of ‘community’, and in order to experience a certain ‘virtual’ existence through computer-mediated communication, is regular connectivity via ICT. Online interactivity can then be sustained through mailing lists, chat rooms, or Messenger; it can be individual or group-based, visible or secret, public or anonymous. Easy access to the internet made it also more appealing to marginal or diaspora groups. But does virtual community have ontological status, or is it less ‘real’ than other forms of community?

Early contributions have argued that new communities could crystallize around virtual cyberspaces by interacting electronically. Rheingold (1993) suggested that former spaces of community were disappearing and replaced by virtual community. A question that follows from this is whether the virtual state approximates the Palestinian nation (state). The idea of a virtual Palestinian
community is important in order to study the immediate question it raised, namely: can online community be perceived as a substitute? The concept of transnationalism sometimes overstates the aspect of mobility. Problems of diasporic exile/immobility are clear for many Palestinians that are under curfew, do not have travel permissions, still have no right to return, and are deal with the agony of post 9/11 restrictions on Arab travellers. Online practices are shaped by experiences of exclusion, isolation and oppression: the necessity to connect online is strengthened by Palestinians’ curiosity and lies in their desire to meet offline. This is especially important for refugees who seek out to others with similar experiences, interests, and shared commitments, thus the Palestinian online community evokes transnational unity.

This does not mean that virtual and territorial communities are equivalent, particularly when considering issues of power. Palestinians prefer the offline ‘real’ community because virtual contact cannot replace face-to-face contact. Is there, in fact, really some sort of ‘timeless’ and ‘spaceless’ dimension? External events or ‘real’ constraints have a direct impact on virtual communities. The point I am trying to make is that neither space, nor place, nor time, are gone. This is clearly confirmed by the online references to Palestinian history and historical demarcation points like 1948, 1967, and 1982. Ismael Neshef, anthropologist at Birzeit University in the West Bank, commented during an interview in 2002 that:

There is something in the structure of this conflict that makes the medium of the internet even more relevant. This is the concept of space, movement, and borders. Space is central, the first attraction of virtual reality is control of space, and the dialectic relation between virtual and on the ground space. Because of these realities, space is transcending but it is not merely virtual, and while it gives a sense of empowerment it doesn’t give real power because it is still limited by objective conditions, for example simply the economic factor. Nevertheless, for the Palestinians it is the idea of a counter or alternative space that makes the virtual so attractive. It is thus significant to remember that space, place, and time have different meanings for Palestinians [due to closure/curfews].

It is thus important to know how virtual space is perceived and tactically employed as well. Much of the literature on computer-mediated communication for example assumes that it is an interactive medium but differences in interactivity are shaped by technological (nature of the interface) and social (user style preference/utilization) factors (McMillan (2002). What is perceived as positive interactivity depends on factors that go beyond the technological. In the opening quote Zizek identifies the unique possibilities of cyberspace, which he connects to alternative, playful, ways of challenging power structures.

Internet use may alter the geographic organization of the economy, but our sense of identity (and how the places in which we live and work are perceived) has also reconnected us to concrete places (Zook 2006:69). Internet technology has certainly created new opportunities for interaction between people and places (in earlier stages excitedly referred to as the global village), but what are the characteristics
determining the outcome and structure of place and space and how should they be understood in offline terms? The ‘new’ opportunities offered by internet space are by no means a free and open substitute for the territorial place, village, or state. According to Wellman, academic interest in virtual communities and the study of these communities led to a neglect of some elementary social issues, such as the materiality of power and the interactive offline/online connection (Wellman & Hampton 1999:649).

So what are the criteria for a virtual, in this case also diasporic, community? Do we see a transformation from everyday communities to virtual social networks? If so, this cannot be generalized as a global phenomenon, or automatically linked to having internet access because the internet needs to be situated in a larger context, including the transformation of dominant patterns of social paradigms. There is indeed an affinity between life online and ‘networked individualism’. The internet certainly supports this pattern of sociability, as both Wellman and Castells showed in their studies. But the transformation of community also predated, or happened independently of, the internet. Actually, and according to Dawson (2003), internet media may also pose problems to the structure/development of diasporic communities because this type of communication is a more “individualistic and impersonal form of interaction than some diasporic/religious communities would care to support” (2003:1). In other words, computer-mediated diasporic communities stir conceptual questions about new social networks as communities that can be clarified with ethnographic work.

Research in Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon confirm that diaspora communication is often expressed as collective rather than individual interaction. In addition, offline and online diaspora interaction vis-à-vis national identity and community often merge. Online sociability is thus a fact of everyday life, the question remains whether online groups/interactions is the same as Virtual Communities? Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) explain that our approach should neither be strictly defined (face-to-face interaction is always required) nor completely open (long-distance community is only imagined). This means that communities do include some form of virtuality; social practices are virtually mediated as well as actually experienced. Even though this does not “live up to the glorified and normatively laden concept of virtual community” (Dawson 2003:38), the internet has fostered new online groups.

Due to the real offline experiences of isolation and immobility, virtual mobility and online interactivity often reflect a need to ‘escape’. The sense of simulation through virtual participation implies that it is not real, as elaborated in the discussion of virtual reality/space. Interesting parallels can be found between escapism and simulated experiences of mobility. By countering the ineffectual dichotomy through a dialectic approach, I propose that escapism is not a mutually exclusive virtue/phenomenon, neither in terms of effect (liberation/false consciousness), nor in terms of motivation (to avoid offline reality/to need offline relations). We can distinguish different meanings of escapism; and a multiple interpretation is important.
because the context is crucial as it explains the point from escape is needed (Evans 2001:60).

Escapism is not necessarily related to the inability to deal with situations in the here/everyday; this may suggests that people are not willing to improve/change their reality. But what of the Palestinian who wants to go for a walk in the green fields near Tarsheha or Jerusalem but is faced by a thick and high segregation wall (Chapter Three and Four)? What of the Palestinian romantic who dreams of experiencing physical love with another Palestinian, but will never be able to because he/she does not have legal/national documents or the permission to cross borders and meet the lover face-to-face (see Chapter Six)? What of the urge to participate in the Palestinian uprising and join the resistance but the impossibility to do so because one is exiled (see Chapter Seven)?

Online space also conscripts offline space; internet cafes are the potent evidence of this interface. Oldenburg (1999) developed an interesting conceptual framework for examining the link between the internet café and the public sphere; for he sees the café as the heart of the community's social vitality. By situated ICs in their offline setting and looking at the different sites and their electricity and power supply status and building permits, I offer a technological and social, or technosocial (Lægran and Stewart 2003), context. Hence, virtual or real?” (Etzioni 1997) is not the actual question; yet the inherited contradictions presented here do raise questions as to overcoming dominant structures that ascribe meaning d to the virtual. This interdisciplinary approach also applies to the dialectic impact of globalization and politics: the internet can validate/strengthen or eradicate/weaken national identity, and in the next section I argue that and it can constitute or counter political agency and resistance.

**Resistance & Oppression: Utopian and Dystopian forecasting**

The [post-colonial theory] shift of focus was also one from politics to culture. This reflected real changes in the world, but it also helped to depoliticize the question of post-colonialism and inflate the role of culture within it. … Some thinkers seem to believe that minorities are always more vibrant that majorities. … It was majorities, not minorities, which confounded imperial power in India and brought down apartheid. Those who oppose ‘norms’, ‘authority’ and ‘majorities’ as such, are abstract universalists, even though most of them oppose abstract universalism as well. Eagleton (2004:12-15)

Everyday resistance in Palestine and in the Palestinian diaspora is connected to the struggle for national self-determination. The meaning given to national/collective identity is marked by resistance and political mobilization. However, national collective identity is not a given but constantly reshaped: neither the claim of a primordial national identity nor denial of Palestinian national identity is very relevant. Palestinians have been engaged in a process of anti-colonial resistance and nation
building for almost a century. State-building dynamics are not always a result of official independence; it can be argued that the PLO emerged as the non-territorial equivalent of a state (Sayigh 1997). To understand resistance of contemporary social movements we also need to study how political processes are connected to the notion of globalization. This will help uncover how the internet can reinforce oppression as well as resistance.

Melucci (1996) was one of the first scholars in social movements/collective action to introduce the concept ‘new social movements’. Melucci argued that social movements are inherently complex and therefore, collective national identity is not an essential force but an outcome of negotiation. His notions of ‘new’ social movements were not meant as showing class conflict versus collective action, as often represented. Yet, to Melucci’s dismay, the ‘new’ notion became increasingly reified as a category, presenting a false contradiction between supporters of the old and new movement theories (Melucci 1996:6). Political movements show an accumulation of different (new/former) degrees of collective action; sometimes witnessing leaps in the way conflict and protest is managed. I agree that there is no ‘new’ without the ‘old’, therefore we cannot understand the collective outburst of the 2000 Intifada without knowing of the aftermath of the First Intifada in 1987. Nor can we analyze the fantastic possibilities for political activism that arise through internet technologies without understanding the importance of under/on-the-ground resistance. Therefore, while the internet can serve as a catalyst in organizing the public sphere, political and social hegemony can still prevent this from occurring. Cyber spatial technology and ICTs can have liberating and empowering potential, but as Dahhan (2003) argued in the case of a different ICT impact on Palestinians and Israelis, they also replicate existing inequalities.

Warner’s understanding of counterpublics helps deconstruct the underlying battles for gaining access to the dominant public sphere. The conflict raised by counterpublics extends not just to ‘ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitutes the public’ and thus confronts the hierarchy of the media (2002:86). This is reminiscent of the tactical and practical methods inspired by De Certeau in Practice of Everyday Life (1984). De Certeau’s position reveals a dynamic relation between elites and non-elites: oppressed classes may possess ‘tactical’ means to resist hegemonic representations and oppression.44 By relating these ‘counter’ methods to the importance of counter hegemonic (alternative) media, I view the internet as a tactic political tool and as a part of the everyday life practices. This interrelated and materialist understanding of the internet is not always considered important however.

I perceive two major views in discussions about potentials for protest and resistance as related to internet politics. The utopian view regards many types of actions as activism or even resistance—derived from mainly positively underlining power and

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44 Franklin (2001) elaborates on De Certeau’s concepts and argues that how people relate to each other, how practice produces inventions is central (71-72).
agency. A more dystopian line of thought questions the possibilities for successful political engagement. Both are also frameworks with which to assess internet politics. Fenton (2005) shows how Hardt and Negri reinterpreted Foucault’s complex concept of the ‘biopolitical’, politics become intertwined with commercial interests; what appears to be political may be just market-based activism. Advocates of this biopolitics argue that new forms of social militancy are allowed within capitalism without a real possibility of transcending it (Fenton 2005:8). This dystopian type of critique is relevant, in fact both dystopian and utopian arguments can be made, and they are clearly present.

From a dystopian perspective, Yahoo, Microsoft and corporate America have power over activists because they create and develop the techniques and mailing lists that activists use. But if we take the latter too far, everyday politics can be reduced to a ‘game’, designed to de-radicalize people; then resistance itself is merely an illusion since people/activists are co-opted by the system/power. Does Bill Gates also control/shape the activists’ decision-making, their political content, and goals or successes? Having scarcely any clarity of what is/isn’t political resistance or a dialectic view of everyday internet politics, leads toward a dystopian disposition even where it is not needed. A closer look at how resistance and protest movements (such as Hamas, Hezbollah, anti-capitalist and anti-war activists) utilize/mobilize online, do not imply so. There are different ways to understand the overlapping and contradicting dynamics. In order to successfully connect to political movements and build stronger networks, mobilization/resistance belongs in both offline and online spheres (Chapter Seven).

The debates on biopolitics evoke another important influence that leads to ascribing utopian/dystopian views to resistance. In Empire (2000) and Multitude (2004) Hardt and Negri discuss how the transformations of neo-liberal globalization affect the imperial/economic logic, political struggle, and resistance movements connected to it. They describe globalization as a complex process that involves a fusion of global capitalist market systems, new technologies, media, changing modes of governance, and (particularly important to this discussion) the development of new forms of resistance. Using ‘multitude’ to refer to a new collective resistance and substituting working class with ‘new barbarians’ or simply ‘the poor’, is actually problematic. It has been argued that the blending of metaphysical discourse and poststructuralist theory is highly complex, if not confusing (Kellner 2002). These conceptual shifts do not stand alone but mirror a broader tendency of philosophic debating in academia, as

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45 The utopian part can be labelled the Scottian type, after James Scott's Weapons of the Weak, the second assumes a more Foucauldian stance after Foucault's biopolitics. For a discussion about biopolities and neoliberalisms see Thomas Lemke 'The Birth of bio-politics'; Michel Foucault's lecture at the College de France on neo-liberal governmentality.

46 Fenton gives a good example of the relevance of dystopian critique in the No Sweat Campaign that initially directed its struggle to Nike Corporation and shows how they eventually become incorporated in the structures of capitalism.

47 Kellner links this 'new politics' to earlier attempts by Laclau and Mouffe who valorised new social movements and radical democracy, without actually providing concrete proposals of struggle in new realities, i.e. leaving us with the idea that resistance is not really possible.
Eagleton also suggests in the opening quote of this section. However, Hardt and Negri’s work inspired many activists and received a great deal of attention in academic debates concerning social movements/political protest, and are therefore important to examine. The reason I address this debate is that these changing class analyses are directly or indirectly linked to the assumed disappearance of nation-states or the role of economy vis-à-vis the state. A critical assessment of biopolitics and class relates to my later reference to online and offline resistance and protest.

Hardt and Negri’s writings about political movements often generalize and thus move away from explaining everyday political agency. New interpretations of class, agency, and resistance tend to read as reifications and require clarity. According to Davis, complex metaphysical ideas that are reduced to impractical redefinitions (rather than concrete and comparative case studies) may also lead to demoralized analyses of collective class struggle and resistance. But, Davis continues, “Even within a single city, slum populations can support a bewildering variety of responses to structural neglect and deprivation, ranging from charismatic churches and prophetic cults to ethnic militias, street gangs, neo-liberal NGOs, and revolutionary social movements. But if there is no monolithic subject or unilateral trend to global slum, there are nonetheless myriad acts of resistance” (201-202). Camfield examines Hardt and Negri’s concept of immaterial labour and concludes that this central theme in their analyses cannot play the role Hardt and Negri assign to it. In fact, from an economic perspective; “This [Hardt and Negri] kind of theorizing is an enormous obstacle to understanding class as complex and heterogeneous formations” (Camfield 2006:14).

Camfield explains why the incorrect assessment by Hardt and Negri contributed to a tendency within critical academia to no longer accept material production and class as crucial; “Multitudes’ suggestion that a certain type of labour has distinctive qualitative features by virtue of what it produces rather than because of a characteristic labour process or place in working class formation, seems a fetishistic methodological error” (Camfield 2006:10). This critique is significant as the socio-economic analysis plays a key role in Hardt and Negri’s major claims. According to Camfield; “The importance of immaterial labour for Hardt and Negri’s project in Multitude goes far beyond the manner in which it leads to a re-conceptualization of the critique of political-economy. Immaterial labour is the basis for the new global class formation which they call the multitude” (7). Thus Hardt and Negri’s writings influenced the assessment of resistance potentials and they that immaterial labour is capable of realizing real democracy as the rule of all by all if one replaces working class with multitude, because the former is supposedly an ‘exclusionary’ concept.

48 In short the argument of Camfield is the following: inspired by Foucault’s reference to biopolitical labour, Hardt and Negri’s contention is that in the current era of economic postmodernization, immaterial labour represents material and immaterial production, as well as creates social life, and thus dissolves the separation between work and life. Their analyses dissolve the distinction between immaterial and material labour, they end up contradicting their initial definition of immaterial labour as labour that produces immaterial products (2006:3).
The problem is that, with such de-classed definitions, terms like ‘marginality’, ‘locality’, or ‘difference’, have become normalized as positive concepts and lost their critical meaning. Eagleton (2004) refutes the new fixation for ‘the marginals’ as a replacement of working class; he asks, “What of the low-paid? The low-paid are not central, but neither are they marginal. It is they whose labour keeps the system up and running.(…) Marginal comes to mean Mexican or African-American, rather than in addition the people of Bangladesh or the former coalminers and shipbuilders of the West.(…) The true scandal of the present is that almost everyone in it is banished to the margins” (2004:19). Moreover, emphasising the other assume there are no major political-economic contradictions within the ‘majorities’ or ‘locals’ themselves.

Fenton presents an alternative to abstract/depoliticized analyses and argues for political efficacy with regards to the internet. We need more than just an increase in mediated protest: “Solidarity is crucial … the socio-political glue” (:14); social movements gain public legitimacy and political force through the embodiment of solidarity offline (:19). Thinking beyond a ‘local’ that is particularly mediated by electronic media, Fenton argues that a collective understanding of an ‘end point’ is necessary for the success of political projects. For this, Fenton deconstructs Zizek’s remark that: “Maybe it is not possible, at least not in the foreseeable future to undermine the global capitalist system because we cannot imagine any alternative to it”.49 This has concrete relevance for internet politics because a key element is the presence of social “imageries”, strengthened by the use of the internet. Social and political dynamics of protest and mobilization have changed and led to the commoditization of information and democracy within the realm of the media. This reconfiguring of space and resistance shows that mediating the message of protest is still not the protest itself; internet connectivity enabling transnational alliances between disparate groups can also lead to the fragmentation and disaggregation of these groups. Moreover, with the revitalization of protest movements since the 1999 Battle of Seattle, academic interest in communication and technology as a space of resistance developed as well. It is therefore important to associate the message, however evocative as a phenomenon in itself, to the (collective) understanding of a common endpoint/target of the (protest) movements present (Fenton:4).

The online spaces of resistance I refer to can be both formal and informal. James Scott (1985, 1990) in particular argued that political resistance is not only that which is visible (formal) but to be understood as part of informal and everyday life practices as well. Michel de’ Certeau’s focus on practice and his differentiation between strategy and tactics as pointed before, help avoid ascribing the same power to means as to ends of resistance Strategies can be the elites’ technologies of ownership and control, while the tactics are the practices comprising non-elite everyday life. It is as if to say that the ruling ideas are often the ideas of the ruling class, but that the oppressed classes also possess ‘tactical’ means to counter-pose hegemonic representations. These everyday struggles are important in our analyses of resistance. While the logic of ruling

class oppression (especially combined with state-power in the case of Israel), necessitates an approach that goes beyond ‘multitude’ or ‘subaltern’ organizing.

When I refer to political protest in the coming chapters, I view resistance as presenting covert and overt strategies; not in opposition but interrelated. Everyday life politics is not a weak extract of the ‘staged’ (formal) resistance; in that regard James Scot is very right. But neither is the local/everyday a representation of the pure/innocent soul of resistance. When referring to coping strategies of the oppressed, it sometimes happens that survival is confused with resistance, as Schepers-Hughes (1999) makes very clear. Gramsci’s analyses prevent the entrapment of resistance into binary views. Many of his tropes (such as hegemony, philosophy of praxis, state vs. civil society, the role of intellectuals) have become common sense in International Relations, Cultural Studies, and other academic disciplines, albeit often selectively.50 By continuously contributing to a deconstruction of resistance in a contextualized manner, Gramsci’s dialectic understanding of power and hegemony go beyond the level of philosophy. Key is his attempt to understand why revolutions fail. By understanding hegemony as domination that advances by consent and coercion, he shows that political dominance is not merely a top-down process. Rather than believing that subordinate classes submissively accept political dominance, Gramsci considered self-activity the soul of resistance and a key element in revolutionary processes.51 Gramsci argued for the presence of an independent organization for resistance, a party or organization that is not a substitute but rather, an organized body of oppressed classes.

Gramsci’s contributions are relevant for the study of electronic media, the internet, and politics because they don’t loose sight of the contradicting realities of capitalism and power. This analysis of grassroots collective politics includes larger political-economic frameworks and helps to understand how different levels of activism can be valued. Such a non-reductionist perspective shows how activists share political strategies or identities; understand the internal diversity involved; and also gives voice to those active ‘backstage’ of politics. The difference between survival and resistance is another important reminder for this study because Palestinian resistance involves different definitions/analyses and may simultaneously refer to grassroots activism, social movements, or insurrection and protest movements. Through Asef Bayat’s work I view political struggle as an amalgam involving different degrees of survival/everyday resistance strategies. Without romanticizing resistance and while still emphasizing the elements of class and state in political resistance, Bayat showed how Iranians engage in everyday protest and counter hegemonic forces against the state (1997, 1998). Sometimes even the practice of survival contributes to the stamina


51 Gramsci’s perception of contradictory consciousness is an expression of this dialectics; peoples’ experience (impacted by concrete political/capitalist realities) during collective resistance shapes their sense of self-emancipation and also collective will.
of resistance. Bayat’s notion of *accumulatively encroaching*: a combination of everyday survival and civil disobedience, was partly reflected in the 1970/80s phase of the Palestinian *Sumoud* (preservation/endurance), and still found in refugee camps.

These approaches help me understand that while there are differences in political internet use, the agents who engage in it are key, not (the intermediation of) technology itself. The internet can positively affect the organization of social movements and resistance. Besides forging alliances and coalitions across different movements, “similarly, the protest activity and alliances of social movements on the ground affects the internal organization of the internet (Fenton:7).” Fenton’s reference to Escobar grasps exactly what needs to be said:

This cybercultural politics can be most effective if it fulfils two conditions: awareness of the dominant worlds that are being created by the same technologies on which the progressive networks rely (including an awareness of how power works in the world of transnational networks and flows); and an ongoing tacking back and forth between cyberpolitics (political activism of the internet) and what I call place politics, or political activism in the physical locations at which the networker sits and lives.52

In light of the different utopian/dystopian views sketched above, global and local mobilizations through the internet altered political activism against Israeli occupation in many ways. Interestingly, the forced mobility also led to successful Palestinian expatriates in the diaspora as discussed at the outset of this chapter. Some played a crucial role as investors and developers of the ICT sector. In the next and final part of this chapter I offer insight in the status of Palestinian internet and *situate* the practices of internet use in three fieldwork research sites.

### 2.3 Materiality of Palestinian Internet: Situating Palestinian ICT

The first ICT initiatives were set-up by Palestinian expatriates that returned to Palestine; these *returnees* formed a core of technology developers. A Palestinian IT specialists group (ITSIG) was established to influence and promote the development of IT in Palestine and they had to deal with many challenges. At the start of this research in 2001, the internet hype still coincided with utopian ideas of a new globalized world with ‘virtual reality’ as a new alternative. However, as outlined in Chapter One, to unveil the complex logic of the internet I follow a dialectic understanding of internet potentials, and a double-edged (quantitative and qualitative) methodology. Contrary to perspective on the internet as a *natural* phenomenon, a further assessment of ICT in this section will confirm that political-economic forces shape the internet for commercial, military, and political motivations. The triumphal neo-liberalism and the advent of the ‘New World Order’ in the early 1990s

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52 Escobar 1999:32 in Fenton 2005:15
contributed to a *crisis of conscience* within social science (Franklin 2001:20). This shift strengthened crises of national identification and indeed also affected general intellectual inputs (Eagleton 2004). As for the economic crises, the IT sector experienced the most dramatic consequences. Neither utopian free market policies nor intellectual streams could prevent one of the nastiest economic crashes to occur. At the end of the twentieth century, merely a decade after the neo-liberal triumph, many corporate scandals were uncovered. Brenner (2003) recalls:

> The revelation of WorldCom’s fraud shook the market because it became perfectly clear that what had appeared to be one of the most successful companies in the telecom business had made no profits in either 2000 or 2001 (and not quite in 1998 1999 either). WorldCom, as one analyst told Fortune in July 2002, ‘seemed to have some kind of secret formula for producing decent margins where rivals couldn’t’: when this formula was understood, the last bit of air went out of the telecom bubble. (…) The bust, when it came, thus proceeded from the dotcoms, via the telecom carriers, to the equipment suppliers and their component makers.

Brenner (2003) recalls:

> The OECD showed that only 37 internet companies of a 242 sample, made profits in the third quarter of 1999, with just two of them accounting for 60 percent of the total amount. For the 168 companies, losses in that quarter exploded to 12.5 billion US dollar. The bursting of the internet bubble was the catalyst for the collapse of telecom industries that began in 2000 with a seemingly endless cycle of disastrous reports. Because telecom accounted for a disproportionate share of capital accumulation, the impact of its collapse was immense. (Brenner 2003). The IT bubble snapped and the reality behind the fantasies and promotions appeared to be a rude kind of capitalism. Instead of a positive trickle down effect, ‘digital divide’/‘virtual imperialism’ reared its head as ugly symptoms. This critical analysis is particularly important in relation to the materiality of Palestinian internet. And beside the general criticism of the free ICT promises, the fact is that Palestinians could not access the actual internet backbone when it wanted. The colonial logic dictated that Palestinian ISP services must go through Israeli providers.

During the mid 1990s IT development became a fact in Palestine. Yet, for a thorough ‘reading’ of the Palestinian internet setting and to understand the relevance, expectations and processes of ICT development, hard data are needed. This final part of the chapter will be devoted to map the technological transformation of Palestinian internet through a local and global lens. After a history of ICT in Palestine and a short study of the internet in Jordan and Lebanon, I will close this section with an assessment of Palestinian internet, thus scrutinizing the relative internet penetration rates. This reassessment will answer the question of how access to the internet is embedded in the context of occupation.
“Need is the mother of Invention”: Internet access, Occupation, and Diaspora

As stated, the internet really came to life with the return of many Palestinian ICT specialists, intellectuals, and investors after Oslo (peace agreements of 1993). The returnees brought back skills, knowledge, and money that soon developed the IT sector to a professional level. Palestinian internet changed from a context of direct occupation where faxes were illegal, lease lines were not allowed, phone lines had a 10 year waiting list, major universities were closed, and where there was no capital… to setting up international IT companies and an increasing Palestinian diaspora ‘tapping home’. While many intellectuals and university professionals were denied travel permissions to attend conferences and universities abroad, some found academic freedom through cyberspace. Thus Bahour’s statement, “al-haja ’um al-ikhtira” [need is the mother of invention] during an interview in 2003, captures what ICT in Palestine basically means.

Due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, international telephone lines between Palestine and most of the Arab world were closed for 23 years. From 1967 till the Oslo agreement international phone connection from Palestine was unavailable. Israeli telecom was never quick to service Palestinian users in the occupied territories. A military order (1279) from June 1989 during the first Intifada even made it an offence for Palestinians to use telephone lines for sending faxes, electronic mail, or any other electronic transmissions, this at a period when contact with the outside world was critical (Parry 1997). With Oslo, the status of telephone networks underwent important changes and ICT became one of the fastest growing areas of development (Bahour 1998). Despite the fact that reliance on Israel remained a problem, Oslo did transfer some of the civil responsibilities from Israel to the PNA (Palestinian National Authority). One of these was the telecom sector, which before Oslo was labelled a ‘security sector’ under Israeli military civil administration. Basically, the only involvement of Palestinians in the telecom field was through Palestinian employees doing the low paid/dirty work Israelis could not do in Palestinian neighbourhoods.

The agreements led to the emergence of immense network infrastructures and made fast amounts of information available while the evolution in computer technology produced computers at more affordable prices adding to the broader ICT penetration. The PNA got control over the telephone networks in the autonomous PNA (A) areas. This limited autonomy did not grant Palestinians a structural base

53 This was also possible because the Palestinian diaspora consists of a relatively high level of educated classes abroad.
54 According to many interviewees, available telephone lines also serve as a source of intelligence for military authority.
55 ICT refers to a broad variety of new/media; video, software, networks and internet technologies.
56 At the time, Area A contained 95% of the Palestinian population and represents approximately 3% of the land area of the Gaza strip and West Bank. Area A and B (shared control) were geographically fragmented by the larger C area under full Israeli control, thus Palestinian telephone networks still remained an integral
for developing a fully independent network infrastructure. However, the newly inaugurated PNA immediately privatized the Telecom sector. Some of the major Palestinian capitalists were recruited and promised that if they invest, they would be given a monopoly license. The investors negotiated a license with the PNA, which was received symbolically on November 15 (Palestinian Independence Day) 1996. On January 1997 the sector was transferred from the PA to the private company PalTel. After 36 years, the entire scope of telecom fell in the lap of the PNA. Sam Bahour recalls the new challenges during an interview;

Our initial staffing was recruiting people from the Palestinian diaspora. Yet, the political constraints do not allow us to do our job properly. Many Palestinians would love to come back but the immigration policy is still in Israel’s hands. I am still here on a tourist visa for the last seven years. Even with all the experience from outside none of us was capable of building a total new telecommunications system from scratch. Plan B was to bring management expertise from outside, by British Telecom.

However, as Bahour described elsewhere (1998), privatization did not mean service improvement or lower costs, as usually propagated by free-market ideologues.

Simultaneously, private investors such as PalNet had set-up Internet Service Provider’s (ISPs) and were offering internet services even before PalTel coordinated the infrastructure, as it was still working formally under occupation regulations. Their status was awkward because they were licensed by the Israeli civil administration, and tapping from Israeli IT companies. Thus, when the PA was installed after Oslo and PalTel was given telecom/infrastructure monopoly, the status of ISP companies like PalNet with license to roam via Israeli providers into the OT was unclear. While all previous network linkages went through Israeli territory, PalTel covered the occupied Palestinian territories with a data communication network ‘blanket’.57 The relationship with PalNet was confusing but it soon became clear that ultimately, all providers (including PalTel) buy their internet lines through Israeli companies like Bezeq. So basically, there was no fully self-controlled territorially-based technological infrastructure. The ‘occupied state’ had to tap from its occupier in order to provide connection for what is still referred to as an independent communication infrastructure. It confirms that Palestinians were never offered real independence via Oslo; their fate was already sealed in the Oslo agreements that Palestinian representatives had signed:

Why we signed this, is a political discussion, but also the incompetence of negotiations: politicians did technical negotiations. Basically, the Telecom Section of the Oslo agreement (art. 36) is a disaster for us while there’s a lot in it for the Israelis. It’s a captive market and they are benefiting from the existing structures. And for security purposes: everything comes part of the Israeli telephone network. Since the Al Aqaa Intifada these area divisions don’t really mean much as all is under military control.

57 Yet, some Palestinian cities were still interconnected with Israeli connection, mainly because of the Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory.
through one Israeli line so they can monitor the Palestinian internet. We have very expensive equipment but no way to connect to the outside world. It is therefore an interesting question why they didn’t cut the internet while they destroyed houses, cities, arrested 7000 people… It takes them three minutes to cut off the data communication lines in the entire West Bank and Gaza, perhaps the political vacuum would be too dangerous.

The last part of Bahour’s quote is quite significant in pondering why Israel still controlled Palestinian ICT. Political (monitoring Palestinians) and economic (Palestinians pay for telecom through Israeli companies) self-interest were the most common explanations given during interviews with ICT professionals. Confirming Israeli interference in the telecom sector, Palestinian landline customers received their bills and customer service from the Israeli company Bezeq. The Palestinian ICT phenomenon confirms that an ‘artificial’ peace sparked the uprising because many of the peaceful agreements led to further lack of Palestinian independence. And it led to great disappointment, as Sabri Saidam, coordinator of the Internet Society, Palestine chapter, told me during an interview in Gaza in 2002:

To be dependent on Israeli telecom (Bezeq) was beyond thought of every individual Palestinian. Sadly we signed an unfortunate deal, though we are already dependent on the Israeli market in fact.

Considering Palestinian dependency and subordination, how can we talk of Palestinian ICT development, especially when we take into account other general setbacks? Interviews with internet companies and internet cafes showed that the situation was extremely bleak between 2001 and 2005. Damage to the Palestinian economy was immense and unemployment rates went up to 70%, while 60% of the population lives in poverty. Marketing local goods is hard due to roadblocks and closures. Thus, when discussing the internet place in Palestinian society, the impact of the occupation needs to be addressed. Many companies lost their feasibilities (and their employees). Those who were able searched for employment in the Gulf or Canada. The political context forced industries to adjust their organizational structure. Interviews showed that Palestinian society was in an experimenting phase of coping with the situation. In the words of the manager at PalNet:

Palestinians are the most adaptable people in the world. See how inventive taxi drivers are even with closures, or how checkpoints became places where people can hire luggage carriage, buy ice cream, coffee, bread… A lot of businesses move into areas where it is easier to work. Not only internet cafes, we are also an example. We transferred our office to the other side [near the B and C areas] in order to stay viable. People and businesses are shifting all the time. Now we have a 24-hour support department, and 6 technicians sleep in the company because the curfews make it impossible to do otherwise.

58 See the reports for West Bank and Gaza between 2002 and 2004 on http://www.worldbank.org/.
In other words, Palestinians developed a ‘survival economy’. The industries grew despite the circumstances of service-oriented industries because they did not directly rely on mobility or geographic boundaries (Tarazi 2001).

As pointed out earlier, if we compare the second Intifada with the previous one (1987-1991), the new and important component is the ability to immediately send out news through the internet – an indispensable information infrastructure. The harsher the Israeli oppression became, the more extensive the Intifada became. Internet use was therefore influenced by on-the-ground realities and vice versa (though not at the same level). Palestinian/pro-Palestinian viewpoints became more audible; politics and infrastructure infused one another. The first significant use of the internet was the increase of email, and all together hundreds of websites were produced (See Chapter Five). Both technological infrastructure and increasing political conflict sharpened the contradictions, and even led to a direct clash. To understand this ‘clash’ it is important to further outline the colonial relationship between Palestine and Israel.

On July 15 2002, Israel’s attack on the ISP PalNet, which concluded with the arrest of six staff workers and deportation of one employee, reflects the Israeli government’s frustration. Their problem, namely, is that cyberspace is not occupied territory, and thus cannot be sealed by Israeli tanks and checkpoints anywhere and anytime. The army sometimes ‘disciplines’ Palestinians into submission, with attacks such as this on PalNet, or by monitoring through their monopoly of the technological infrastructure, such as Bahour hinted at before. The Israeli domination over Radio Frequency Spectrum prevents the PNA from controlling telecommunication resources. Israeli companies allow their telecommunications to be broadcasted illegally over Palestinian territories; they control over 50% of the mobile market. Telecom services in Palestine are relatively expensive because PalTel has to purchase its service from Israel and resell in Palestine. As a result, Israel provides telecom services to its users for one third of the cost of services provided to Palestinians. On the other hand, Israel is one of the top countries in IT development, giving Palestinians easy accessibility to (copied) software. As many Palestinians have friends and family inside Israel, access to technology becomes easier. It is therefore relevant to study Israeli ICT, also since Jordan and Lebanon are Israel’s neighbouring countries.

Israel built a highly competitive high-tech industry and developed its ICT technology in the shadow of war. Military investment consumes most of the government spending and the army is the countries’ premier incubator. Perhaps because Israel’s general level of education ranks close to the bottom in mathematics and science, Israeli high-tech was built by expatriates and the ability to tap from Jewish investment bankers in Wall Street which opened a line to the US capital market (Escwa 2002). Not surprisingly, ICT was also founded by unemployed army specialists and returned expatriates from Silicon Valley. In 2000, venture capitalist (VC)
investments accounts for 0.99% of the Israeli GDP, second to US investment levels and three times that of Europe. Israel became the international centre for software development and hosts some of the largest computer and research and development (R&D) companies like Microsoft and Intel.

In 2004, PalTel marketed its new service offering direct access to the internet, bypassing ISP providers. An unfair competition follows from PalTel’s special monopoly status that it inherited from the Oslo era. This monopoly status meant that Paltel represented the main technological backbone in the OT.60 Thus all ISPs have to go through Paltel, and considering Paltel’s dependency on Israeli providers, this eventually comes down to Palestinian ISPs reselling from Israeli ISPs.61 The technological dependency on Israel (also in political terms) has significant consequences for Palestine. When Israel deployed from the Gaza Strip in September 2005 the Army destroyed the phone lines, cut the main connection line between the North and South of Gaza, and dumped rubble on the central part of the line (Saidam 2006). In the Palestinian context, the internet does more than relate to ‘flows of spaces’; it transforms flows of places and territory through IT company buildings, cable lines, internet cafes, and ICT community centres. These new offline places symbolize the expansion of physical networks as meeting points, while they become new military targets. An interesting addition to the offline settings became the Palestinian juxtaposition in virtual place and space (Chapter Three). A study of the penetration rates/internet access in this regard is therefore crucial.

**Internet Penetration**

Since the internet became accessible and more Palestinians got online, the discussion erupted about the number of Palestinian internet users and the ability to rate internet penetration. In 2000, major ISP PalNet started investigating internet usage in Palestine and came up with the first numbers through the following calculation: 26,000 households with internet connection with an estimated 40,000 private internet users (from what I witnessed this was a low estimate because households extended families and neighbours play an important role in daily household life). Furthermore, some of the large institutes linked up students and employees with PalNet -such as Birzeit University (Ramallah/WB), al-Azhar University and Islamic university (Gaza), and together with several big NGO’s they counted for another 20,000 users. Finally, commercial retailers such as Internet Cafés and communication-advertising companies, with a 24-hour lease line, provided internet to approximately 60,000 (indirect) clients. At the time, PalNet covered approximately 65% of the ISP market; this would have made the total number of the internet users in Palestine

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60 Laila El-Haddad, Free internet in Palestine could have negative impact on Local ISPs. Daily Star Lebanon 16 December 2003
61 The Paltel monopoly in telecommunication did not last forever. In 2006 the Minister of Telecom, Jamal El Khodary of the Hamas government, granted another license for Mobile phone services to the Kuweity Al Watania company.
approximately 150,000; a rough total (individual/home and public) penetration rate of 3 per cent.62

Table 2: Percentage Distribution (member of) Household that use Internet by Period of Time.63

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period of Time</th>
<th>Palestinian Territory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less Than One Month</td>
<td>84.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – 3 Months</td>
<td>76.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – 6 Months</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 – 12 Months</td>
<td>58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before One Year</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ISP’s later registered an exponential growth in internet penetration: from 3 per cent in 2000 to 8 per cent in November 2002. In 2004, PCBS measured a home penetration rate of 9.2 percent and approximately 35 per cent total penetration. And by February 2004 PalTel had introduced a new system of direct internet access through a special four-digit number. Bypassing the traditional ISPs, users would now only pay the local phone costs.64 In other words, the internet changed from being a selective service since early 2000 to a retail product as the establishment of PalTel, the emergence of more ISP’s, the introduction of IT facilities through public and educational institutes, pre-paid internet cards, internet subscription, and the mushrooming IC’s witness. To the surprise of many, political instability did not negatively influence internet interests.

Considering the economic catastrophe and continued colonial suffering, the Palestinian technological evolution seemed to make another leap forward. A good illustration is the change in prices of one of the researched Internet Cafes. Al Carma in Ramallah was one of the first and successful ICs in Palestine. Until 1998, internet users were mostly a selected group of people. Al Carma dropped prices from NIS 25 (5 US $) an hour, to 12 NIS, and eventually NIS 4 an hour (less then 1 US $). Instead of the 25 costumers in 1998, they had 200-300 costumers a day in 2001, and even more in 2002. Where it used to be a luxury, internet has also become a necessity for Palestinians that want to do business on a national level.

A genuine increase of internet usage requires better connectivity, better penetration, cheap equipment, accessible services, as well as social programs that can relate to the differences between Palestinian localities inside Palestine. Research about ICT development in Palestine was mainly carried out in the West Bank, the

62 Other ISPs I asked generally agreed with the outcome of these calculations. The Palestinian Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) was not capable of conducting extensive research at the time.


64 The same initiative in Egypt clearly increased the internet use. From Free Internet in Palestine could have negative impact on local ISPs Daily Star 16-12-2003 M El Haddad. In a statement the Palestinian ISPs declared to consider this move by PalTel unfair competition.
Palestinian political-economic ‘centre’. Additional fieldwork in Gaza revealed particular social-political differences and similarities. During interviews, I heard that IT producers in Gaza had to work harder than in the West Bank to encourage internet use. The earliest penetration rate estimations suggested these differences as well.

When deconstructing the absolute penetration rate by splitting the level of usage and frequency in usage, in Table 2 we can see that 84.9 percent of internet subscribers regularly use the internet. It also shows that a small number of subscribers are not regular users, even though they have internet at home. This might be explained by the fact that many internet subscribers are also connected to the net at work, university, or other public places.

Table 3: Ownership ICT Indicators in West Bank/Gaza 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household Ownership of Land-line Phones</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Ownership of Cell Phones</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Ownership of Computers</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with Modems</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with Printers</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with Scanner</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Subscription to the Internet</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Users from anywhere</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Members with Web Sites</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with Digital Camera</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 3, we see a general illustration of household and individual ICT ownership, including hardware such as modems and printers. The figures show a clear difference between private and public access rates (Zureik 2005c:6). The number of households with internet is much lower than the number of households with computers or telephone landlines. In other words, a large section of the population can be considered potential internet users.65

Table 4 shows that the average West Bank basic ICT indicators, such as ownership of computer, telephone, and the internet, is higher than in Gaza. However, a closer look also shows that the differences are not that great and that the gap between the West Bank and Gaza was decreasing. This difference is even more relative when taking economic status into consideration. Abu Marzouk, the owner of the first ISP Company of Gaza, *Palestine Internet Services*, started in 1999 with his business when he returned to Palestine in 1998.

65 And these numbers continue to grow, a survey from August 2005 shows 13.1 percent home connection (Zureik 2005c:9).
Table 4: ICT indicators & growth rates Palestinian Households 1999-2004

Data from PCBS surveys for 1999 and 2004 as used by Waked (2005) and Zureik (2005b), original graphs and statistics in Appendix 3.
Abu Marzouk discovered there was no local internet server available in Gaza and started offering wireless broadband connection. The main problems were the high prices due to dial-up and installation costs. He explains the choice to use the internet regardless of the higher costs, as follows:

The first six months (of the Intifada) saw an extensive growth because people were stuck at home, bored and frustrated. Then the economic crises hit. But the internet also became the only source of accurate news, and of chatting, which is very important because people needed more means of communication “to talk”.

By 2002, Gaza had two more local based ISP’s with the same internet service quality as in the West Bank. Despite Gaza being one of the poorest places in Palestine, it saw an increase in internet connectivity; internet connection at home almost doubled. Yet, in Gaza too—in the face of a devastating economic situation—internet consumption was growing because people needed it more than ever.

PIS was also the first company in Palestine to develop ready to use ‘credit’ cards that were sold in shops and used for home connection. Palestinian internet without the impact of occupation would have seen a different development. For example, IT hardware cannot be repaired or renewed because Israeli import restricted goods for the Palestinian IT sector. Israel was clearly breaking international agreements such as the Paris Economic Protocol, but measures were not taken.67 Thus, even though the Intifada infused internet usage, it could have been better. For Sabri Saidam, leading the ISOC-Palestine chapter and living in Gaza at the time:

Had we been given political tranquillity and some grounds for elevation, internet in Palestine would have been rocketing sky high. Even after 2 years of oppression and repression, Palestinian society met the internet and expressed interest in communication as a whole, as well as gave an international touch to their lives.

Jordan

In late 1995, the National Information Centre began to give licenses to educational institutions for internet access, and since 1996 Jordanians could obtain local internet access. Upon the request of King Abdullah in 1999, The Internet Technology Association of Jordan (Intaj) was set up and presented the REACH initiative, aiming to define and study the IT sector. Realistically speaking, Jordan took these measures to attract investors and the country received backing from leading global IT companies. Several more reasons contributed to the relative success of the internet in Jordan aside from this general top-down push including its human resource of educated youth comprised of many diaspora graduates with technical skills. Many returnees (of whom many were Palestinian by origin) played a prominent role in the

development of ICT as well. In Palestine the Oslo ‘peace’ process was the defining factor of returnees; in Jordan the impact of the Gulf War and expulsion of Palestinians (from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) made them the pioneers of the field.

Public internet access was soon a fact. The internet company Global One offered private service at 6.5 JD (US$ 8) per hour when the first public internet connections were presented. In 1997 Nets offered basic internet access service and became the first Jordanian ISP to offer unlimited internet service for 110 JD (US$) per month (and prices dropped to 45 JD a month, still very expensive). FirstNet also started offering internet, at 1.75 JD per hour and 50 JD a month. Individuals and organizations could establish internet accounts/websites without an official government approval or registration. Yet these high phone/internet access costs kept the number of users relatively low. In 2004, the government sold its shares to France Telecom, the end of JT’s monopoly was supposed to improve IT access and quality. The initially enthusiastic prospects of foreign investment policy did not improve local markers because French Telecom had its own profit in mind. However, rapid developments and government privileges led Jordan to stand amongst the best Arab countries in the ICT field (Open Arab Initiative 2006:13). Due to these and other factors Jordan is ahead of many Arab countries with similar political/economic structures. The data communications (infrastructure) services were handed over to private companies in the early phase. Here too, returnees provided the boost after the

During an interview with a Reach coordinator I understood that internet penetration figures from the Telecom Regulatory Commission were based on 70,000 home subscribers multiplied by either 2.5 users or 4 users. The first is an average and the last a positive estimation. This revealed approximately 250,000 internet users in a population of 5.2 million in 2002 (less then 5%). Before the growing availability of mass media like the internet and satellite technologies, marginal communities (refugees and women) had little access to public spaces; they were often subject to the regulations and rules of the state or family. Satellite television and internet has an impact on the political and social structure because it provides information and new methods of entertainment, and alters existing patterns of interaction between individuals and/or groups. As explained in the context of Palestine, internet development is positively linked to education. Universities were the first large settings with internet availability to Jordanians. In the city of Irbid, hosting Irbid University and Yarmouk University, the main street (opposite the university entrance) hosted the world’s largest number of IC’s on one street.68

As internet use grew rapidly in the whole of Jordan the authorities had to tolerate news and comments online although they continued to regulate print and broadcast media; Jordanians were able to obtain information from the internet that is either prohibited or ignored in the local print press. Intaj coordinated the input of internet penetration through the Jordan Internet Community Centre (JITCC)

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68 Many articles in the press were devoted to this issue when the Guinness Book of Records mentioned Irbid has the street with most internet cafes in the world.
initiative. Individuals all over Jordan participated in the projects; girls benefited more in terms of a percentage attendance rated at 67%. According to Palestinian-Jordanian Yousef working at JITCC: “We have hired female trainers and this made a difference. Especially in Jordanian Bedouin villages where women are not allowed to participate in many things.” The centres were more accepting because of the connotation to ‘education’.

So far in 2 years we trained 30,000 Jordanians on computer courses. We have 75 centres by now, 20 started just 4 months ago. Nice thing about those centres you go in find 9 year old behind pc and 50 year old next to him. Many are illiterate, but I talk about computer literacy, they don’t necessarily know how to write but how to type.

Only 8 centres had a website but JITCC prepared a web template for all centres with a manual and trained the trainers to know how to use the templates and other software. All trainers are computer/science graduates, participate in workshops like web-design, and must be from the community. “If we don’t find a BA graduate we take a diploma (college) graduate”. The discussion forums of the JITCC sites were not active and people seemed restrained. “I notice that even trainers find it hard to regularly email us. It is a social problem I think, they look up to us and maybe sometimes feel intimidated.” One coordinator therefore made a big Mansaf (Jordanian dish) and gathered families to tell them what the centres are for. He used traditional tactics to introduce modern techniques. Several interviewees mentioned that as a consequence of Jordan’s strict involvement in the refugee camps, Palestinian camps are treated according to Jordanian policy and thus can appeal to the same services as other Jordanians. JITCC than also included refugee camps in its national target of the REACH initiative. I was told about these challenges during an interview with Samer in Amman, also a Palestinian-Jordanian.

Samer coordinated the REACH initiative at Intaj and was involved with the implementation of IT related projects:

Camps are over-populated and have problems; whenever there are regulations from government they go crazy. Some centres I visited in camps are working really well because are cheaper than the private centres. We don’t make a difference; refugee camps are just as well part of Jordanian community. But there is a difference in theory and practice, as a Palestinian I know that too.

JITCC centres were opened in refugee camps al-Naser and al-Hussein near Amman, and Jarash refugee camp near Jarash city. It was very promising and I have seen bright examples, though, while on a fieldwork trip to one of the JITCC villages I discovered the centre was closed and the computer facilities looked rather neglected. The general coordinator later told me that, after the launch of the project it is eventually the responsibility of the community to organize the grassroots projects. But then the success was still JITCC responsibility.
In some centres, JITCC can monitor the websites people visit via with a cash engine connected to the server. During an interview in July 2003, Yousef said that the servers “catch all the sites they visit and we have remote access to it. No, we don’t mean to monitor them, even if we see something abnormal we don’t tell them.” Yousef had several discussions with the project manager about the regulations:

They had this principle of only use it for learning. I myself liked computers and internet because I started with the games etc. later on chatting. It shouldn’t be only for learning, I’d feel stupid to go there.

These general developments were the contexts in which the internet spearheaded in Jordan. In Chapter Five and Six I will look at the specific development of internet cafes and websites. In fact, language was important for internet participation; Arabic interfaces and web-design layout were motivating factors, and personal chat and email in Arabic even more so. It is important to be able to choose between different languages, as people don’t only use Western internet tools.69 “If the internet will be spread on the masses, language should be redirected” said Sameeh Toqan. And so the Maktoob website was born in 1998 as an experimental project to offer Arabic email. The advantage meant that even interface language during browsing could be offered in Arabic. Its success became apparent when the number of users doubled every month after its inception at 5000 users. The site grew into a complete portal with entertainment, music, communication, news, and more, with three million subscribers by 2003. Yet Lebanon was the trendsetter in Arabizing the internet in its earliest stages.

**Lebanon**

The internet needed to overcome many difficulties in post-war Lebanon. The problems were directly related to a basic infrastructure destroyed by the Israeli invasions in the 1980s, and the consequent civil war that lasted until 1991.70 Although the wars were exacting a toll on general develop, Lebanon is considered the regions’ most liberal and market-oriented country. Lebanon has the largest market for personal computers of the Levant (i.e. Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, all bordering Palestine-Israel) with 38% of the 222,223 PCs to be shipped to the region,71 The relatively higher price of branded PCs means that 85% of the people buy locally assembled

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69 In Jordan for example, the use of English as a language is more common than other Arab countries as statistics about the interface language choices show. Around 30% of the people in Jordan choose Arabic while in SA this can go up to 90%.

70 The war is never really over; the newly built power station was bombed in 1999 by Israel, which meant that access to electricity was still not guaranteed, and there were more bombings again in the summer of 2006.

71 Dania Saadi, 1/16/2004 Daily Start “Lebanon tops Levant PC sales”.
Like in Jordan and Palestine, expatriate Lebanese professionals, above all those who were trained abroad, set up many of the ICT initiative frameworks. Different explanations can be given about Lebanon’s relative success: free-market/neo-liberal policy, higher level of economic development, and a strong history of migration to industrialized countries. One of the important social factors is the strong and liberal character of the Lebanese press, which has not been undermined by 25 years of civil war. This climate influences a positive attitude towards the internet by the Lebanese government. Lebanon therefore stands out for its technological transformation abilities that influence the production of information in Arabic. At the core of this success is the combination of Lebanon’s superior regional media network (especially print journalism) with limited censorship and government control. Despite damage to the technical infrastructure during the wars, in early 1990s Lebanon became one of the first Arab countries to embrace the internet when Lebanon’s daily newspapers (like al-Nahar and al-Safir) were amongst the first to be put online.

Initially the average cost of internet access was between US$ 63,- and US$ 73,- per month—relatively high since it equals at least 10% of an average monthly salary (ESWA 2003:7). At the end of 2002 the average monthly cost of internet subscription was between US$ 18,- and US$ 20,-. In mid 2003, 5 dominant ISPs were operating in Lebanon: Cyberia, Destination, IDM, Fiberlink Networks (Lynx), and Terranet. Other, local, internet service distributors offered 24/7 internet connection through aerial cable networks as well, though these were considered illegal since they bypassed fixed line networks and were recently (repeatedly) closed by the Ministry of Telecommunications. In 2002, Lebanon reached an 8% internet penetration. With the introduction of the 4-digit fixed rate the state finally succeeded in lowering the cost of dial up connection. Lebanon was the only Arab country that did not use ADSL service; to increase the internet penetration the ministry assigned ISPs to provide ADSL in 2006 (Idem). Many internet cafes in Beirut sprouted in the centre of town and around the universities. At the time of research (2003/04) prices varied between 1500-3000 LL (1-2 US$) per hour. But in the sha'bi (working class/'popular') areas like South Beirut's Dahia, Mreizhe, or Haret Hreik, near the main refugee camps, there were even more ICs and they were usually cheaper - approximately 1000-2000 LL (1 US$) per hour.

This broader context also shaped the logic of ICT production in refugee camps. People can be introduced to the internet in several ways such as school and work, radio and billboards, and even television campaigns. Weekly articles in leading newspapers focus on the internet and its impact, while television airs internet related interviews and discussion programs for audiences based in Lebanon. I followed the

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72 Technological Development in the Arab World, Current and Future Trends. 2002. In the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) report
73 According to Gonzales (2001), many entrepreneurs left after disappointed by the current instabilities, infrastructural problems, and corruption.
74 This was manifested in the Economist International Union ranking Lebanon number 1 in the Middle East based on monitoring the political and civil freedoms. See also note 9.
Daily Star’s Web Watch section where new or interesting websites were spotted and described. There were references to the Israeli/Palestine conflict and refugees on independent online magazines such as Amin.org and Palestine Remembered. Freedom of press and publication are important components of Lebanese society.

However, the availability of internet sources immediately raises questions in relation to internet accessibility. Access and infrastructure guide us in assessing ICT and internet penetration in the Arab world. Moreover, interviews in Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon seemed to show that the Arab ICT market benefited from its late and slow start: this paradox meant the ability to escape the general economic crises of the dot.com economy. This demands a critical assessment of Palestinian internet development.

How to Assess Palestinian ICT?

The materiality of ICT shapes Palestinian internet consumption and production. Critical analyses of (virtual) internet participation therefore needs to be linked to political economic structures and everyday realities. Internet holds great potential for Palestinians because their mobility (as well as means of communication such as landlines for telephones) is very much determined by external forces. Yet, it is important to situate the internet’s infrastructural developments in Palestine within broader regional developments. The Palestinian historical contexts are not only relevant, but also necessary. In early assumptions the reader is mostly left with a depressive outlook. The Arab region is characterized as having great problems with the development of internet technologies because of restrictive media policies and lack of acceptance of ‘new’ media by state authorities (Kircher 2001:137). Generalizing the Arab world/Middle East can lead to essentialism and we therefore need to analyze people and communities within their complex context. Fast (and contradicting) technological developments also necessitate a continual update of data. Moreover, Kircher’s analysis of internet obstacles in the Middle East is mostly a review of the state of affairs 10 years ago, while much has changed since. As Kircher also states, the level of technological development is not homogenous but individual countries differ in terms of education, economy (2001:141) and we may add politics.

From its start, Palestine (the currently occupied PNA areas) had a relatively high participation in economic and commercial ICT development and the PNA played a motivating factor. As sketched above, PalTel performed well in constructing a modern, high-performance infrastructure. This is even more impressive given the difficult circumstances (i.e. working under occupation and constant uprisings) in which PalTel had to operate. Thus a contextualised analysis is important in order to counter easy denouncements of ICT in the Arab world. Especially when conclusions are based on premature research. The way RAND referred to ICT in the Arab World through people’s assumed willingness to develop is problematic for instance (2003
RAND research). Contrary to the assumption that all countries are the same, comparing countries like Syria or Saudi Arabia with Palestine reveals many differences, especially when considering the effects of occupation, as RAND fails to in its assessment.

At the time of the first fieldwork in 2002-2003, there was no official register of internet usage by the entire Palestinian diaspora. But from 1999, telecommunication certainly became part of Palestine’s intellectual, professional, and personal life. Before Oslo, Bezeq, the main Israeli telecom provider, rarely connected local Palestinians: a seven-year waiting list used to be normal, while there was always the risk of phone taps. And before the Oslo Agreement in 1993, international phone connection between Palestine and the Arab world was not even available. I have explained that telecommunication became a ‘subject of negotiation’ and Palestine Telecommunications Company (PalTel) was the first to experiment after the negotiation deals were cut. Looking back, there were actually small revolutionary leaps as the section before illustrates. The moment Palestinians were able to control (parts of) the technological infrastructure, 250,000 households and professionals were on waiting lists for telephone lines. PalTel quickly realized a zero-waiting list, which eventually also allowed ISPs to provide internet connection. In 2002, more than 12 private ISP companies in Palestine were able to optimise the infrastructure and expand the business.

Thus, when we assess Palestinian internet use we have to emphasize that it is a relative assessment. It is therefore important to ask how policy makers interpret the simple statistic that internet users in Palestine reached 10 per cent home and 35 per cent general connectivity in 2004 (see Table 3). Hence, as Waked (2005:10) states:

A desire to know how these figures compare to those of other similar countries will almost certainly arise from knowing the extent of the diffusion. The Palestinian internet diffusion rate would resonate differently if one notes, for example, that this 11.2 percent is larger than in many other Arab countries with comparable incomes. When evaluated against Palestine’s relative economic performance in the last four years—a period which saw ICT defuse rapidly in Palestine concurrently with a pervasive economic collapse and a rapid upsurge in poverty—this relatively high diffusion level stands out even more.

75 The researchers claim that one of the general setbacks for a strong ICT culture is that: “non of the regions governments, excepting Israel and Turkey, has been installed as the result of what the United States [sic] considers “free and fair” elections. To the extent that they lack legitimacy to varying degrees, these governments maintain strong central control over most aspects of life and commerce. Besides being necessary, from the governments point of view, rule by a strong central leader or group is a cultural norm in most of these societies” The information Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa (2003:xii). RAND seems to have a selective and politically charged take on their findings.

76 Apart from the difficulty to retrieve data from refugee camps in the host countries, an additional problem for the Occupied Territories is that the occupation made sampling and face-to-face methodologies very difficult.
It is clear now that although the ICT story in Palestine is still quite young it has already passed through three differently important stages. Prior to 1994 ICTs were almost nonexistent compared to other countries; from 1995 to 1999 the infrastructure grew rapidly, opening the door for new opportunities on which pioneering users capitalized; since 1999 infrastructure growth levelled off under the pressure of enormous political and military forces but access and use indicators grew rapidly as more users began to capitalize on the new opportunities. The political situation and the degree to which Israeli practices deter the diffusion are perhaps the most important determinants of ICT growth in Palestine. The growth summary in Table 2 gives a good view of the relative growths as it focuses on the data of all ICTs between 1999-2004, i.e. just before and in the middle of the second Intifada. The developments that took place in pre-Oslo stages are clearly reflected in the first growth trends (144% computer ownership and 70% home connection increase.77 The diffusion of telephone landlines exploded some time after 1995 and then stopped increasing in 1999 when it had reached 40 percent of households. However, although it remained constant since then, it seems that its increase, until 1999, opened an important door for other ICTs to grow until 2004, a door which was previously shut by Israeli forces. The internet continues to develop within the socio-political situation.78 The role of (and relation between) state and technology is a recurring point in media and communication studies. The issue of state-controlled infrastructure within this context is important in tackling questions of ownership, technological set-up, or financial interest. In fact, any attempt to explore issues related to Palestine faces conceptual obstacles; the Palestinian case cannot be reduced to simple representations: “It lies at the centre of international conflicts, now claimed by some to be conflicts of “civilizations”; it is at the crossroads of superpower interests in the middle east; it involves some of the most important humanitarian crises” (Waked 2005:10).

In the discussion about the emergence of ‘grassroots’ internet groups and their potential for resistance and building communities, it is often assumed that the nation state no longer features as the privileged space for the representation of identity. It is crucial to be clear about such claims when the researched group lives under a military occupation that controls the territorial technological infrastructure.79

77 See Appendix 3 for the statistics, and for more analyses Elia Zureik’s (2005c) large project on Palestinian ICT, which includes Waked’s critical account I refer to here. It must also be noted that the definition/measure of internet penetration itself is subject of debate. It makes sense to measure internet connection in a home that actually offers internet connection to more than 5 direct family members, friends or neighbours.
78 On top of the exponential poverty and unemployment described in the section before, more than 50% of the population lives in rural areas: with the occupation closure and curfews on top of this, Palestinian communities were even more isolated.
79 During the heaviest military incursions in 20 years (in March 2002) the IDF destroyed roads, water pipelines, electricity, and power plants in most PNA cities and refugee camps.
2.4 Conclusion

It is clear that the progressive role of post Oslo returnees marked the birth of Palestinian ICT. Instead of generalizing about the weak ICT as yet another confirmation of Western superiority, it is clear that infrastructures should be measured in terms of the level of the national network.\(^8\) The obvious assumptions upon which infrastructure indicators are based included state sovereignty, demarcation of the nation-state, and ownership/access to the infrastructure. In the case of Palestine, these assumptions are either invalid, or not in line with standard assumptions and assessments as analysed in the last section. Many ICT indicators are based on universal indicators that reflect neo-liberal ideologies; yet, failing to consider the basic effects of occupation and neo-liberal economic domination is like ignoring an elephant in the room. This does not do away with the positive potentials of the internet, but shows that assumptions in relation to ICT and internet potentials can be unclear or one-sided. Thus internet development should be considered through its potential for grassroots resistance to political powers within the context of dominant (top down) electronic media practices.

The concepts dealt with in this chapter constituted the theoretical frameworks of this research based on three general tensions: space, mobility, and resistance. Space and place were examined in terms of national identity coupled with virtual community. Mobility and immobility were linked to what transnationalism means for the Palestinian diaspora considering their ‘state-less’ and ‘right-less’ status. Despite a lack of full Palestinian sovereignty, it is important to note that the presence of the PNA had a positive impact on ICT development and internet utilization. Agency and tactical means of resistance are therefore at the core of Palestinian networks of support. I do not see resistance as a notion to be used without critical references to its actual impact, but rather, I take a dialectic approach that goes beyond utopian or dystopian conclusions. This is important to the theme of the next chapter in studying the contradiction between virtual mobility and everyday immobility, potentially resulting in the discovery of interesting new possibilities via internet use.

\(^8\) The RAND research even in 2003 when ICT showed a exponential growth in Palestine, could not predict any positive developments, nor did it specifically mention the Palestinian case: “It is unlikely that any country in the Middle East and North Africa, including Turkey but possible with the exception of Israel, will fully enjoy an information revolution during the next decade.” The information Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa (2003:xiv)