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

Aouragh, M.

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 8: Online and Offline Resistance—Conclusions and Discussions

8.1 Introduction

The presence of post-Oslo returnees in the Occupied Palestinian Territories marked the birth of a professionalized ICT sector in Palestine in the late nineties, not long before the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000 would have an enormous impact on Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and Diaspora. This fusion continued during the aftermath of 9/11; the internal Palestinian political landscape was in great turmoil after the death of President Yasser Arafat in 2004, and the subsequent collapse of Fatah and election victory of Hamas. Along with this turmoil, between 2001-2005 internet usage increased and political uprisings erupted. The timing and location of this research, therefore, corresponded with a new historical phase.

Since the 1990s an amalgam of research on the impact of the internet has been produced, as shown by the increase of empirical and theoretical propositions discussed in Chapter One. Several of the academic contributions focused on the practices of political protest and mobilization, and suggested that ‘new’ media replaced ‘old’ styles of resistance. Empirical research about the social and political impact of the internet between 2001 and 2005 in Palestine and the diaspora formed a unique chance to build on these studies and examine the practices of internet usage in everyday life. When the Palestinian Intifada erupted, it dramatically shook the transnational Palestinian communities, and 9/11 further changed the region. Early analyses of the situation corresponded with a familiar cult of spontaneity, romanticizing an amorphous-style of activism that signified a postmodern trend in Cultural Studies. However attractive this spirit may seem in general, it did not match with the hardcore realities of war and state oppression in the region.

The harsh political realities also corrected some of my premature propositions about the political impact of the internet. In light of these conditions, it is difficult to rely on loosely connected global networks and underestimate the significance of nation-states. Also, abstract analyses of empire and multitude as forms of resistance can be problematic. Fenton (2003, 2005) shows that in order to be successful we need a collective understanding of a common goal or strategy. While we need to consider ‘the everyday’ in research analyses, Scheper-Hughes (1999) made the important point that everyday resistance sometimes actually means everyday survival. Similarly, Bayat (1997, 1998) showed that we should not be too generous with ascribing ‘resistance,’ and offers a more refined view of different forms of movement and struggle.

The assessment about the impact of the internet is part of the three tensions I studied: mobility-immobility, resistance-oppression, and space-place. I start this chapter by outlining the main conclusions as shaped by the preceding chapters and
follow the structure of the three tensions. Based on the research questions, in the second section I sketch an overall evaluation of the positive and negative impacts of internet for protest movements. This dialectic approach was crucial for two reasons. Firstly, the reality of Palestinian occupation shows that even though the internet plays a supportive role, it cannot replace the face-to-face organisation and centrality of political struggle against (colonial) oppression in everyday life. However, the benefits of the internet should not be underestimated either, and deserve thorough analyses. This was, ultimately, the overriding argument in the research. As I stated in Chapter Two, we need to move beyond the general utopian/dystopian discourse that has sometimes shaped internet research. I therefore consider the internet to be a blessing and a curse. Before addressing that dynamic, I turn to the general objectives that were outlined in Chapter One, i.e. the role of internet in creating transnational Palestinian linkages/imageries and local and transnational activism through the internet.

8.2 Re-considering the Three Tensions

Because of the barriers to communication imposed by the political context, the birth of the internet entailed a major transformation of communication and access to information. Internet usage began to have a local impact on the biased representation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Rather than merely identifying direct, statistical levels of ICT penetration to measure its effect, I also link internet development to economic and political independence. The presence of the PNA and takeover of (part of) the telecom infrastructure after Oslo had an immediate and positive impact on ICT development and internet utilisation. The stories of my encounters in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine capture the first reactions and signify the novelty of internet at the time I started my fieldwork. Though by now the internet has become more ‘normalised’ the case studies nevertheless show what internet may mean for a context that is marked by Palestinian struggle for political self-determination and everyday survival. Furthermore, throughout this project, the importance of mass electronic media developments has been shown to be particularly significant for the Palestinian diaspora.

This is especially important as the internet contributed to the process of state formation, providing alternative mobility, and shaping the imagination of the Palestinian nation. The internet has enabled Palestinians to communicate with each other from different, previously unconnected places. I discerned two related processes in these newly established transnational relations. First, the act of communicating itself was very significant, because it meant connecting Palestinians to each other. This was a new phenomenon, possible for the first time since 1948 on this scale. Second, the content of the transnational communication through the online discussions and diasporic traversals led to a new way of creating and imagining national identity. Meanwhile, direct contact, especially between refugees and non-refugees and people in divergent socio-economic circumstances, also led to what I termed ‘little scratches’
in the collective imagined community. For example, disappointment about Palestinian unity felt by refugees in Lebanon who discovered that not all Palestinians in the OT were considered with the plight and rights of refugees in the host countries, in turn engendered a re-examination of the ‘ideal’ Palestinian nation. The construction of an imagined community is thus a continuous process that is directly linked to class, politics and mobility.

Internet Mobility

The 1948 (Al Nakba) and 1967 (Al Naksa) exodus of Palestinians—and the refusal of the Israeli state to allow their return, links the term Palestinian diaspora to forced displacement. The concepts mobility and immobility are therefore connected to the political struggle for the right of return or acknowledgement of their exile. The major problem facing Palestinians is a lack of freedom of movement, and so Palestinian internet use clearly served a deeply felt need. Besides the flow of people, the flow of information is also strongly controlled. In Palestine, the internet is embedded in a colonial reality. Even after the Oslo agreement, Israel continued to stifle the information flow into and out of the occupied territories. Immobility and control was partly overcome when internet usage enabled direct transnational communication and grassroots participation in news production. Palestinian publishers, commercial entrepreneurs, and government projects capitalised on the possibilities of the internet. The contradictions between virtual mobility and everyday immobility were especially great on a personal level.

The virtual traversals have had a tremendous impact in overcoming a sense of alienation. The internet provides different forms of entertainment that are badly wanted, considering the problems isolation and alienation that many Palestinians suffer in the refugee camps. In addition to this form of ‘escapism’, direct connection also enhanced the confidence of the refugee communities, helping to reinsert the refugees at the centre of Palestinian politics. Yet, the online traversals cannot overcome all barriers; material support that was needed for internet projects in the occupied territories were often prevented by checkpoints, closures and curfew, while equipment for the ICT sector was often withheld at the borders. Nevertheless, the fragmented Palestinian nation was meanwhile being reconfigured by websites, chat, emailing, and internet projects in which the diaspora often participated. Internet users in refugee camps found contact with their long lost brethren, disseminated feature stories and facts, and also consumed information from the new (global) sources. In other words, online mobility re-constructed national identity. The internet changed the dynamics of social relations; the junction between technology and social practices is found in the development of an alternative linguistic style. Cyber slang, in due course, increased the level of grassroots participation.

Internet communication was grounded in imaginations about the (return to) homeland. The importance of online mediation is related to the discrepancy between a collectively envisioned future and an experienced present. The act of communicating
itself (internet medium) and the content (internet message) affected the collective imagination of the nation. Online meetings and encounters strengthen a particular refugee/class consciousness amongst Palestinians. This interaction led to little scratches as well as challenges to Palestinian unity. I explained that collective national identity does not do away with internal (class or gender) differences. I also observed a politicized and collective participation. Overcoming immobility by direct interaction combined with the sense of (political) confirmation is a key element in the process of identification and the collective imagination of Palestinian community online. Online interaction with text and images regarding (people in) Palestine strengthen this sense of commonality and shared values.

The Intifada politicized Palestinian entrepreneurs who on their commercial websites made references to the Israeli closures and occupation, and people from the elite class also initiated websites about Palestinian culture/history. Whereas the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada spearheaded internet consumption, it also validates the strong imagination of a free Palestinian nation. Interaction with or about Palestine in cyber space nurtures those sentiments with a nationalist/unified character. The fact that such political identities are contested means that the construction of a political/comradely community translates into activist-oriented expressions. This is why collective identity is often simultaneously imagined regardless of class, regional, and gender differences, as confirmed by the engagement of Palestinians like Murad, in Amman for Jerusalemites, and Jenni, in Australia for Palestine Costume Archive.

The Nation, the Net and the Internet Café

Despite the ‘crises’ of the nation-state and notions of ‘de-territorialisation’ as debated in the first two chapters, the nation-state, locality and political independence are in fact crucial, and share in the imagination of the Palestinian homeland and community. This special kind of anticolonial, progressive nationalism relates to Anderson’s (1992) ‘long-distance nationalism’ as a kind of nationalism that does not necessarily depend on territorial location in a home country. I argued that colonialism is a prime reference of the electronic media in Palestinian society, and that an anti-colonial nationalism is a common identification in the context of exile and occupation because the offline situation and international political opinion strongly influences Palestinian online presence. Several case studies illustrated a wide variety of personal motivations. The Across Borders Project, for example, shows how an imagined Palestinian nation is influenced by the internet, since ABP participants in Lebanon and Palestine depict how the internet shapes a virtual imagined Palestinian Nation.

In general, the internet functions as an outlet to express what takes place in the occupied Territories, and to Palestinians in the Lebanese diaspora, the internet has offered direct knowledge about the homeland and live communication. The internet provided an important and long-desired meeting point. The internet, combined with grassroots Palestinian interactivity, redefines the relation between territorial place and virtual space. The internet allows a kind of communication between Palestinians that
was not possible before, connecting politics and media, the virtual and the real. These innovations impact the Palestinian imagination of a collective nation. Websites became the mediating ‘spaces’ through which the Palestinian nation is often imagined and the use of internet motivated the emergence of hundreds of Palestinian websites. Technological developments, the *Arabization* of the interface, and an eminent public relations strategy towards Western audiences, marked the groundbreaking developments of websites. I have categorized the collected Palestinian websites and identified both *globalizing* and *localizing* websites. If emailing, chatting and mailing lists are the vehicles that re-structure the diaspora, then the Palestinian websites are the pillars of this new structure. One can not overestimate the emotional and political impact for a refugee in Lebanon who could finally come across a site about his or her original village in Palestine.

By also investigating the *mode of operation* of websites I was able to know how websites were grounded and to know the people behind the websites. Internet access and usage, it turns out, is influenced by latent and manifested forms of control. At the start of collecting Palestinian websites the prevailing style was a secular and national presence. On one level, this is not surprising, since the aim is to convince the (biased) international community about the Palestinian plight. Almost invariably, Palestinian (Arab) users are not the main target, and thus their desires (need) not included in the (tactical) decisions regarding online linking and framing. Moreover, negatively biased views about Islam(ism) would ‘distract’ the project of *re-humanising* Palestinians that serve to mobilise solidarity. I discovered that one (unexpected) result of this online public sphere was to create a system of *exclusion*. Some of the popular websites among Palestinians I interviewed, such as websites linked to Hamas or Hezbollah, were not referred to by the leading (globalizing) websites.

One of the great opportunities during this Ph.D research was to help set-up the P@IS project. During the course of this project I was able to compare my ethnographic research with comprehensive data analyses. It turned out that the quantitative and qualitative approach in our different methodologies strengthened one-another. After co-linkages and locating web content, P@ISP, found fragmented networks for Hamas and Fatah. The different political-ideological networks also represented different infrastructures. Unlike Fatah, which offered informative (often old) content and predominantly linking to other Fatah related websites, Hamas networks showed a complex set of multilingual websites with frequently updated content in text and multimedia. While the main Hamas website (Palestine Information Centre) had a links page to other (pro)Palestinian online sources; as a systematic search for out-links of all Hamas related websites P@IS could not retrieve significant hyperlinks that connect the different audiences.213 Nevertheless, on the ground Hamas was clearly considered popular and more sophisticated online.

---

213 See the P@ISP (November 2007/by Anat Ben David) report *Content Distribution in Isolated Networks: How RSS Replaced the Hyperlink for Hamas and Hizbullah*, page 2.
Hamas utilizes syndication over linking by having built a virtual network comprised of links for RSS (Really Simple Syndication) readers. Users can subscribe to the feed or other websites (via XML codes) to republish (i.e. syndicate) the feed/source to their own website. Effectively speaking, the content is there, but not easily traceable, and therefore has two advantages—it does not have to rely on content-distribution networks, and through these multiple channels neither fear potential hackers. P@ISP shows that Hamas has an ‘end-user strategy’ with targeting tactics based on; email subscription, RSS feeds and posting content on another website. The end-user culture and the order of the three subscription options tell the history of RSS with a ‘Middle Eastern twist’. Hamas, and in a comparative analyses also Hezbollah, stood out as unusual actors “not because of the nature of their organization, but because of their unusual linking behaviour and self-reliance on their content distributions.” P@ISP identified a similar net behaviour for Hamas and Hezbollah, this is a similarity also drawn by many ‘counter-Terrorism’ studies. But to P@ISP, the interpretation “does not focus on the nature of these organizations (a legitimate political party for some, a terrorist organization for others) but looks at them as actors operating in a larger webspace.”

The analyses also confirm how technological leaps from 1996–2006 in Palestine have played an important role as I outline in the Palestinian Internet Time Table (Table 1).

One of the crucial reminders of offline research is that the virtual does not replace the territorial. The internet did not replace the desire for a (non-virtual) nation-state. The frameworks of this online public sphere were found in the many mailing lists, and later chat-rooms and MSN. While generating knowledge about the present, the internet also helped recover the past. For example, the way destroyed villages were systematically displayed online has revived and reconfigured memory. Therefore analysing virtual participation is linked to political economic structures and everyday social realities. Working in the camps enabled me to see the (often illegal) infrastructures and networks, the creative tapping of satellite connection, and other forms of agency. ICT structures alter face-to-face participation of Palestinian producers and consumers, in internet cafes in particular. One of the important conclusions about internet cafes as new public places offline is that they also promote social change.

ICs represent the new spaces where the offline and online meet, and capture important aspects of the interlock between virtual and everyday life practices. ICs are contested spaces especially when seen through the prism of gender. This new public space remind one of the first ‘coffee houses’ in the debates about the public spheres: internet cafes were neither neutral/public nor completely closed spaces. They also signify processes of change and agency such as the tactical participation of women and establishing Curfew ICs. New virtual network communities and ICs impose new

---

214 Idem, page 6. With this approach P@ISP contributed in developing and strengthening in-depth and multiple-disciplinary analyses, and which also helps to go beyond the hypes and stereotypes in media and academia such as E. Reid (Reid et.al, 2005) Collecting and Analyzing the Presence of Terrorists on the Web; A case Study of Jihad websites.
interpretations about place, time and space which are best examined in their local setting. In the meantime people trespass the social boundaries by flirting online and arranging offline rendezvous. Access to people and information about sensitive topics like sexuality or politics were not available on this massive scale, at such high speed, and in such an anonymous fashion before.

Internet Resistance

In contrast with the way ‘sexy’ topics about Palestinian internet usage are sometimes framed vis-à-vis ‘radical islam’ and ‘cyber war’ (Chapter Five), I found that identification and representation take shape around a secular/national rather than a religious/extremist axis. The online characters constitute the offline real politics, facilitating a national/anticolonial engagement of the community. Thus, because of the politically driven transnational goals and strategies, Islamic/ist references are lacking, rather than shaping the online world. This clearly relates to the “Middle East twist” mentioned above. P@ISP concluded that (generally speaking) Palestinian/Middle East internet “differs from Western societies by their strong relation with the ground.”215 This is a significant verification of my analysis and corresponds closely with the arguments delineated in all the chapters, especially vis-à-vis the dialectics of offline/online internet and the relation between internet and the political situation in terms of exile and occupation.

Tactical means of resistance are at the core of offline and online activist networks that mobilize in and/or for Palestine. The way Palestinians try to achieve their political demands via the internet, and the role Palestinian diasporas/solidarity activists play as well, was one of the fascinating progresses to study. The activism, which I termed Cyber Intifada, is based on the interpretation of resistance as an anti-colonial project that involves direct-action and support. Internet technologies serve as part of the general Palestinian tools, repertoires and tactics of protest. Dissemination of alternative information is one of the most important tools in the competition over audiences (their potential support, to be more precise). Independent journalism gives participants more democratic control over content and representation of news; activists have erected new online sources like Indymedia and blogs.

Hear Palestine, Palestine Monitor mailing lists, local websites, and chat-forums took part in this competition as they assumed the permission to narrate their history. Furthermore, closure and military repression limited the possibility to organize public meetings by political parties but started to be contrasted by lively online debates and mobilization. The political utilisation of internet and the construction of alternative public spheres matured with the creation of discussion forums by popular political movements like Hamas and Fatah. The internet fits in broader resistance and concentrates on the aim to disseminate, to organize, and to attack. I deconstruct the cyber intifada in three ways: as a public relation tool to convince international

215 Idem, page 5.
audiences, to recruit activists and mobilization/organize for local and global protests, and as a weapon, via hacking. This combination makes the internet a ‘Scottian’ weapon of the weak as I explained in the discussion about the concept of resistance in chapters two and seven. However, I also propose that equating cyber intifada and internet activism with anti-colonial struggle or grassroots resistance is problematic. With reference to Gramsci, I argued that technological developments and internet utilisation help to assert and contest status-quo power.

These theoretical contributions did not stand by themselves. Online and offline ethnography challenged my views regarding political and social movements. Firstly, certain offline, on the ground, experiences cannot be transformed into virtual internet experiences, no matter how flashy or entertaining websites or internet games were. Secondly, while emails and websites help to motivate different publics and disseminate news and information, a personal debate/face-to-face conversation is often crucial to generate commitment. People will generally be mobilised to join a movement or protest via offline affiliation and persuasion, especially where this engagement concerns defending what is “controversial” or literally dangerous. Internet activism, I found, is not a surrogate for offline and everyday resistance. This point became even clearer when I started to uncover the Janus-faced character of the internet, namely one that is a blessing and a curse. Therefore, after this short summary of the mobility/space/oppression debate in the preceding chapters, I will focus on how to evaluate the general pro’s and con’s of internet.

8.3 The Internet: A Blessing and a Curse

To some extent the new technologies are revolutionary and do constitute a revolution of everyday life, but it is often a revolution that promotes and disseminates the capitalist society and involves new modes of fetishism, enslavement, and domination, yet to be clearly perceived and theorized (Kellner 2002: 299).

There are incidents, I think, where governments are involved, doing either reconnaissance or testing out concepts…. I would hope that one of the lessons we learned from September 11 is that you don’t wait for a disaster to occur before we fix the problems we know exist. (Richard Clarke, US National Security adviser, 2004).216

US foreign policies never showed much enthusiasm to defend Palestinians, but the neo-conservative Bush administration led to an even more openly bigoted stance. When the FBI raided the InfoCom Web Company in Texas, leading intellectual Muslim bashers actually applauded.217 InfoCom hosted more then 500 websites including al-

216 Clarke; Nations using internet to spy, November 5 2004. aljazeera.net
Jazeera, Palestinian fund Holy Land Foundation, and other Muslim websites. The post-9/11 context has increased policing and surveillance. A determining transformation ushering in new policies like the US Patriot act was also replicated in other countries. State/military powers increasingly use the internet to spy on 'enemies' and sometimes organise digital attacks. I discern an evolution from the somewhat cool internet activism—with the 1990s grassroots Zapatista rebellion in Mexico as the progressive token example, towards a potential state-organised 'preventive' cyber war. Clarke's alarmist comments above, regarding the use of internet for 'counter-terrorism,' begin to articulate this second vision.

Alongside the internet curse, the Israeli occupation causes a variety of difficult circumstances, and forced Palestinian exile hampers Palestinian grassroots resistance. But: the internet has opened new arenas of contestation, as well as accommodating dissident groups online, such as media activists. In spite of pro-Israeli media, (and historically motivated legitimacy/support for Israel), several polls showed a shift in opinion since the Intifada. On the other side, the internet also broadened the space of political participation via direct media activism and counter-hegemonic discourses. Chapter Seven presented the complexity of the (assumed) revolutionary endeavour of internet politics. I showed that student groups, intellectuals and political activists in Jordan found a space to express their dissent or reveal political scandals. The experiences of Aloush in Amman were similar to those addressed by Rahimi (2003) on Iran. The early internet developments in Iran were set in a very open environment and in various ways contributed to the political turmoil of the late 1990's. As late as 2003, the internet was free of control and even actively encouraged by the state; student protests were hardly measured by Iranian state authority as a way to curtail their internet use. They display the democratic potential and decentralising impact of internet tactics.

The aim of the next section is to emphasize the limitations of the 'utopian' vs. 'dystopian' dichotomy: rather, the internet might lead to submission as well as facilitate resistance. I call this paradoxical situation the internet Blessing and Curse. Building further from the conclusion in the above section, I will describe this dialectic view more closely. I will discern 'civil disobedience' the major blessing, and for the curse of internet I discuss the 'Damocles sword' hanging above the activist's computer.

---

218 According to the European Commission survey of November 2003 Europeans view Israel as a great threat to world peace, ahead of Iran and North Korea. The Eurobarometer poll found that 59 per cent deemed Israel "a threat to peace in the world", with the figures rising to 60 per cent in Britain, 65 in Germany, 69 in Austria and 74 in Holland. The results prompted a furious reaction from the Israeli government and pro-Israel lobby groups kinked the results to anti-Semitism. Frattini, Italy's foreign minister and EU representative at the time had to apologise for the results on behalf of the EU. See http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/story/0,1076084,00.html “Israel outraged as EU poll names it a threat to peace”, by Peter Beaumont, Sunday November 2, 2003.
Blessing: Online Disobedience

“You can fool some people sometimes but you can’t fool all the people all the time.” Bob Marley [inspired by a quote from Abraham Lincoln] in the song Get up Stand up, from the 1973 album Burnin.

The new possibilities offered by the internet are crucial for Palestinians because Palestine is occupied by the fourth strongest military state in the world, and more than half the Palestinian population is dispersed outside the Palestinian territories, i.e. excluded from the geographic centre of struggle. Palestine is regarded the territorial point of reference, centre of gravity. But the occupied Palestinian territories are the ‘weak centre of gravity’ as Hanafi (2001:14) described. Online discussions and virtual debates have the capacity to unite Palestinian communities not just as part of a cultural/historic community, but in a political sense as well. Palestinians co-produce a particular, national, public sphere online. Like the traditional Palestinian liberation movements, they are connected to the collective nation/struggle. New internet technologies contributed to the reconstruction of national identity.

The history of the Palestinian people is important for understanding contemporary Palestinian political identity, one very much influenced by a collective experience of displacement and oppression. Collective identity is also shaped by Palestinian experiences of Sumoud (steadfastness) and Intifada (uprising). Since it is hardly possible to escape the realities of the occupation, the al-Aqsa’ Intifada became a part of daily life for Palestinians inside the territories. Albeit in a different way, Palestinians outside the territories are impacted by the Intifada as well. At the same time, the internet served as a tool for empowerment because it offers an alternative space for local/regional activism. Examples of websites, local mailing lists, and grassroots (refugee camp) internet projects provide easy-to-access (cyber) meeting points, and (Pro)-Palestinian bloggers covered on the ground events in the occupied territories. The Intifada and the growing use of internet provided a political and communicative re-orientation towards the Palestinian Territories. This re-orientation is represented by political analyses and solidarity projects that challenged the hierarchic structures and triggered new styles of civil disobedience. I focus on: decentralisation and internationalization that benefit this democratic tendency.

By using new media forms, social/protest movements developed alternative voices against the expansion of ruling elites. ‘Bottom up’ or ‘grassroots’ internet groups emerged and started to pose a potential threat, as evidenced by attempts of governments in the US as well as Middle East to close down parts of the internet. The question is whether activism via the internet jeopardizes Israeli hegemony considering its capacity to suppress political disobedience, and what impact it has when people’s awareness of monitoring leads to self-censoring, as I will explain in the next section.

Prior to and during the Intifada, Palestinians have waged protests against the Palestinian National Authority. A form of political decentralization through websites of political groups was partly possible because controlling the internet (or closing it down) in Palestine is not only difficult, but also a sensitive issue in a context where
revolt and political consciousness is very high. So when I asked whether internet users were afraid of state control/prevention of the internet, it was considered irrelevant. During interviews with internet activists in Palestine, I was also told that the Palestinian authority was too engaged by more important problems which people to monitor or exclude online was not a priority. Moreover, access to proxy servers through which there might be form of control and censorship by PNA was difficult, because Israeli companies control them. As a result, webmasters were also able to bypass PA telecom networks and upload data by using Israeli systems.

Through several cases in this thesis I have described activist networks which organized their efforts via mailing lists, websites, chat sessions or MSN. These efforts included solidarity campaigns, eyewitness reports, calls for demonstrations, virtual anniversaries of the Intifada, and more. This reveals how a centralised style of organizing is combined with grassroots initiatives. Historically, national mobilisation through posters/leaflets is a prominent part of organising in the Occupied Territories because other sources (independent media/press) were monitored by Israel. This was a predominantly offline political (parties and factions) practice during the first Intifada (1987-1993). The Second Intifada marked a new era by the cyber leafleting. I argue that the offline organized (and often official) wall poster/leafleting, as evident in the streets and camps, is still the most dominant, but an example in the West Bank in 2002 showed that virtual and actual methods became intertwined. Public communiqués and posters (with the official logo) of al-Aqsa Brigade appeared in the streets in Jenin and online. In fact, it was decided that only the posters that are also published on the party’s website would be regarded as official.

In other ways, virtual participation partly transcends the official authority and central mobilization—political groups outside the territories are not completely excluded from the flow of information in Palestine anymore. This challenged the official political agenda where it concerns the struggle for the right of return and the position of refugees. As efforts in Lebanon to organize a refugee poll through the internet show, many support the ‘homeland’ but also want to be part in the decision-making processes. Political organisers outside the Occupied Territories were also able to be reached by Palestinian cadres inside, and vice versa. As the activist from the al-Aqsa faction in Lebanon told me in 2003:

We get the reports and communiqués through the net and distribute them here. We on our side became part of the Intifada by offering them our military expertise, how to make bombs, rockets, etc. We can infiltrate the wall, which Israel is building to divide us.

Palestinians and their supporters showed that with internet the international community can no longer claim ignorance of the Palestinian plight. The Internet is

---

219 This dynamic changed over the last years. The PNA became even more centralised and committed itself to US brokered politics of appeasement (Hassan 2003), it also became more repressive to political opponents.
practically forced upon Palestinians by political circumstances. On the ground in Ramallah in 1996 was the first act against distorted representation about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and demystified many of the myths that circulated. Several of its initiators later transformed its principles into the influential Electronic Intifada that challenged the bias reporting during the second Intifada. Sometimes online activism can lead to offline activism and broader international support lead to solidarity/activism. The Second Intifada witnessed broader coalitions and grassroots solidarity groups being set up. Internationalization includes support from nearby countries in the Middle East—an important factor because through popular pressures in Arab countries governments were exposed as giving mostly lip-service support to Palestinians.

When I asked people how they see ‘internet revolution’ they usually mentioned the transnational reach and its anonymous communication style. Internet assists political movements to undermine oppressive regimes, offered important space for agency. For example, people posted their protest calls on chat rooms of Maktoob, and with three million members, the potential for political mobilization is obvious. It gives a platform to anti-government sentiments as nothing before did. Internet reconnection between Palestinians had a high value, and as Ibrahim from Amman told me, “it is also enormously important to help connect with non-Palestinian supporters everywhere in the world.”

One of the examples that best represents an internationally based solidarity for Palestine—and has the internet at the core of its work is the International Solidarity movement (ISM). Apart from its main language, English, the site is also in Arabic, Spanish and French, and thanks to the 15 support groups that provide a link to the site in their own languages, including Swedish, Irish, and German. The ISM recruitment mainly happened through the internet but ISM leaders travel around the world to speak at teach-ins, demonstrations and meetings; activists in different countries set-up support groups that pick up the work internationally. This means that offline organizing is still of great importance. As Adam told me, “After a speech I always tell people to go online and read our publications and personal stories. It empowers people at home when they realize the activists and victims are just like them, people basically want to help based on what they saw and heard. We prefer they have direct contact with the support group in their locality, that’s how we maximize our impact.” If there wasn’t the internet to organise efficient coordination and advertise their campaign to recruit people and money, the ISM would have face many problems.

I have illustrated that beside the information battle there are also direct confrontations between online groups; this level of activism is particularly renowned by the hacktivist battles. Hacktivism can be considered the electronic version of civil disobedience. The internationally set-up initiatives mostly communicated and organised their actions via cyber space. Very significantly in this example is that the internet gave space for participation of non-elite/marginal groups. Refugees from Lebanon joined hackers communities and felt they shared in the Intifada. There is indeed more
political freedom online than offline, but I have also noticed a certain cautiousness among activists. This relates to what I consider the *curse* of internet.

**Curse: Damocles**

Critical analyses are required in order to balance the over-idealization of the potentials ascribed to internet technology. As situated before, the internet hype was connected to utopian ideas about a new globalized-postmodern-world in which virtual reality was the new alternative. But it did not work out that way, exactly. When *Indymedia* was shut down during the April 2002 sieges, people woke up to the first reality check. Determined activists continued their efforts by spreading news and giving live reports via telephone, but an alarm had sounded. From assessments of internet technology, it was clear that to have free access to the internet, more than just basic connection is needed; control over standard infrastructure, cables, and buildings is crucial. Free market economy and neo-liberalist ideology was strongly connected to early IT promises. But the 'liberating' ICT pledge was never kept. The IT bubble burst and the real picture that emerged was of naked capitalism. Instead of the 'trick down effect', the digital-divide and economic gaps were alive and kicking.

This critique does not contradict the above-mentioned blessings but shows the underlying complexities. I aspire to move beyond the legitimate but sometimes also reductive criticism of 'technological determinism', and the euphoric but unrealistic notions of a 'technological revolution'. I point to the importance of the underlying contradictions of globalization in order to present a more nuanced picture and capture the fundamental dynamics of contemporary political-economic power. Refusing 'objective' (material) realities can lead to a process of de-politization or convey problems in our grounded analyses. This problem is very concrete when internet cafes or internet connection at home is prohibited. This is, first of all, related to a general economic problem of class inequality, and in particular, the status of refugees in camps who were often not allowed to build their own sustainable infrastructure. Another problem is the fact that young women in remote camps sometimes cannot travel to an internet café. It is thus important to include the everyday dynamics of digital divides in our analyses.

The (depoliticized) idealization of the internet often goes hand in hand with championing the free market. The ‘liberation’ notion of the internet was formulated by Thomas Friedman (1999). He argued that global communications and global finance are the two great democratizing forces where no one owns the internet or is able to turn it off. And thus he particularly predicted that China would develop a free press, even if the Chinese leaders do not know that yet, or oppose it. But many examples have since countered this neo-liberal utopian view, and recent studies, such
as Open Net Initiative,\textsuperscript{220} showed that many governments have been censoring the internet, including Friedman’s token China. George Monbiot offers a compelling illustration:\textsuperscript{221}

Shi Tao, a journalist working for a Chinese newspaper, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for “providing state secrets to foreign entities”. He had passed details of a censorship order to the Asia Democracy Forum and the website Democracy News. The pressure group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) was mystified by the ease with which Mr. Tao had been caught. He had sent the message through an anonymous Yahoo! account. But the police had gone straight to his office and picked him up. How did they know who he was? Last week RSF obtained a translation of the verdict, and there they found the answer. Mr Tao’s account information was “furnished by Yahoo Holdings”. Yahoo!, the document says, gave the government his telephone number and address of his office. So much for the promise that the internet would liberate the oppressed.”

Monitoring has continued. In 2002, the BBC reported that in 2001 Chinese authorities had shut down 1,700 internet cafes that did not abide to rules concerning restricted online sources.\textsuperscript{222} Ownership, technological set-up, or financial interests greatly impact the potentially democratic success of internet access. Kahn and Kellner (2004:89) describe how the Patriot Act introduced the implementation of powerful governmental surveillance systems, such as Echelon and Carnivore. These systems can monitor all forms of electronic information for keywords and behavior that is deemed potentially threatening.\textsuperscript{223}

Internet activists became more aware of the potential political risks. As Monbiot explains, Yahoo! had already in 2002 signed the Chinese governments’ assurance of self-regulation; they promised not to allow information that jeopardizes state security. A few years later Google — who had even promoted their online freedom as an alternative to Bill Gates’ Microsoft dominance, admitted that it would not offer links that contain material officially banned in China. The reasons of such incidents have to do with the fact that the internet is a technological tool and relates to the logic of ICT corporations. Monbiot counters Friedman:

[H]e forgets the intermediaries. The technology which runs the internet did not sprout from the ground. It is provided by people with a commercial interest in its development. Their interest will favour freedom in some places and control in others.”

\textsuperscript{220} Open Net Initiative is a joint project between institutions at University of Toronto, Harvard Law School, University of Cambridge, and Oxford University. ONI documents worldwide Internet filtering, surveillance and censorship and has collected an impressive archive.

\textsuperscript{221} In: Litt and Laegram in New Media & Society, 2003 vol 5 (3) 307-312.

\textsuperscript{222} Intriguing is the transformation of the Total Information Awareness (TIA) databank into Terrorism Information Awareness immediately after 9/11 \textsuperscript{(89)}.  

\textsuperscript{223} In the Guardian, September 13 2005
The IT multinational Cisco Systems cited by Friedman as one of the facilitators of internet freedom is, in reality, one of the powerful corporations that provided technology and expertise for the filter systems and routers for oppressive regimes. Furthermore, the emerging policing measures limit the movement of people and ideas, especially in the context of war. In Palestine, the ISM was confronted with a similar situation as Indymedia; suddenly there wasn’t a capacity to use their main tool:

During the heavy sieges whereby every minute was dedicated to organize and publish, ISM worked together with Indymedia in Palestine. We would call our support groups in New York and Los Angeles with briefings that they helped post online or faxed.

The ISM was forced to reorganize due to the security matters. For instance, at the beginning, activists registered directly through the website to volunteer in Palestine, but when the ISM offices were raided and hard-drives taken (when it became clear that they were being monitored), they had to rethink this practice. They changed tactics and urged people not to send passport numbers or even flight details through the net. The ISM took special care: they had people in Ramallah (where the site is maintained) to secure the data while support groups around the world offered technological skills. Related to this became the question: in which way can the importance of offline mobilization be compared to online activism and mobilization.

Adam admitted that “The internet is good yet impersonal. Many people came to hear me speak after they either saw me on television or in articles. To see me face-to-face is important, because the whole thing becomes tangible. Besides, the internet doesn’t reach everybody.” The increased violence against Palestinians and activists in Palestine clearly affected the ISM. The on-the-ground reactions made them switch from being pro-active to protective: “We are trying to move back to the pro-active strategies. For sure, there are certain things we can’t do anymore and we have to operate in bigger groups than before”. Violence against unarmed foreigners (journalists, UN workers, and activists) eventually had a negative impact on new recruitments. But the immediate responses saw the contrary. The news about the deaths of these activists served as a mobilizing force: “…as the violence increased we got more people… by the end of April, instead of the planned 150, we received over 300 people. Rachel was killed, then Tom was shot, then Brian was shot…but instead of scaring us off, the opposite happened.”

Beside the offline challenges, the points I stress in this section concern monitoring and virtual imperialism; a term coined by Rheingold with regards to the digital-divide (1993) that turns out to be even more symbolic in this discussion. Sometimes it is a dilemma; emailing and mobile text contact is the fastest communication for activists, but that media is also highly susceptible to monitoring. The internet can be used, without a doubt, but often at one’s own risk. Digitalization of communication thus makes the user more vulnerable to state control, and may cause self-sensorship. This potential monitoring of what people access or email comes down to a politics of intimidation: a Damocles Sword. Several authors have pointed to
this process (Rohozinski 2003), and the Information Warfare Monitor examines how states and non-state actors exploit information and information systems. 224

At the time of research, this information warfare inside the Palestinian political context was not a big issue because the PNA did not have the ability to control Palestinians’ internet usage. The political reality undermined Arafat’s ability to control his people at the time and hence compromised his authority. As Sam Bahour stated during an interview in 2002:

The PNA doesn’t have the technological competence to censor internet. The ICT community is so vocal and well organized compared to other sectors anyway, the will and ability to prohibit censorship is stronger than the will of the government. Although we have a lot of complaints, this is a star to Arafat and the PNA.

This was a blessing, but also reveals an element of the curse that Palestinians face. One of the major reasons for this failure of the internet to empower Palestinians is, the military occupation by Israel. Fearing its use as a tool of resistance, the Israeli army have attacked internet providers or cut their connections. Sam Bahour described the situation:

Our environment is under a microscope, we should be frank about it. I laugh when website companies sell promises about ‘security’ of websites. The word internet equals ‘insecurity’. The awareness is at least that insecurity of the internet is not a de-motivating factor for people to utilize it, but that it belongs to it. A comprehensive solution also requires funds, which is not available here and now.

Israel controls the infrastructure and may decide whether Palestinians can access the telecom service. The destructive impact of the Israeli military on Palestinian society included Telecommunications and media, such as occupying radio and television stations. And when owners of local radio and television stations returned to their studios they found their offices plundered and their equipment damaged. Amwaj television station had its programs cancelled and replaced by a German porn channel. 225 Moreover, Israeli companies can prevent dissemination by and access to internet if it wants to, but often did not for intelligence and economic reasons. The economic benefits of the private sector in Palestine were a major factor in the reluctance to control (and thus discourage) internet: freedom and control are thus two sides of the same coin. Whereas the internet created a form of political decentralization and led to a process of democratization, there are also examples of

224 Information Warfare Monitor is an advanced research project Advanced Network Research Group at the University of Cambridge. The project seeks to examine this emerging dimension of global security. http://www.infowar-monitor.net/index.php.

225 Report from Rita Giacaman at Birzeit University, 16 April 2002 and Palestinereport.org, April 3 2002. The main international donors; UN, WB, and Government of Norway, had estimated that only during the March/April incursions caused physical damage in the West Bank only to be 361 million US dollar, with most loss’s in the private sector.
the Israeli show of force with regards to internet access. This was experienced directly by PalNet. During our talk the owner of PalNet described how they were targeted:

At 2.30 in morning, Monday July 15 the IDF invaded our building. The soldiers came inside, searched the whole building, broke or blew up doors that were closed. They eventually entered the main power source room and shut down the complete connection, which resulted in all the internet lines being cut for 24 hours. The soldiers stayed here. I was wondering why only our company in this building was cut off, if it was not deliberate, then why? Well I think they came for us, they wanted to turn us off. They don't like what we're doing on the Net.

The situation is precarious. It is not clear in which direction the military-political activity in relation to Palestinian internet will go. Military crackdowns have continued in scope and severity, but at the same time, new technologies such as satellite internet connections offer a potential escape from reliance on Israeli internet producers like Beseq. The very fact that everyday life still gives rise to political agency is also important to remember. This thesis continually emphasizes how ICT technology has been used to combat oppression, and has shown how online activism works with on-the-ground organizing and demonstrations. Many creative activists employ internet and computer technologies in the struggle against injustice, and have been effective. But the challenges imposed by fierce and equally dynamic ruling regimes remain, as they co-opt the internet as a means of control. The internet has been a mixed blessing for Palestinians, although the story of its use in their ongoing struggle is far from over.