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

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Summary

This study explores the creation of transnational linkages between Palestinian diaspora, the reconstruction of collective imaginations, and (local/transnational) political mobilization or activism through the prism of the internet. It is grounded in ethnographic research in (refugee) communities in Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon. Considering the complexities of such multisited and interdisciplinary research, and especially the urge to investigate ‘from within’, my analyses relied on qualitative/offline as well as quantitative/online methodologies. Fieldwork took place, off and on, between September 2001 and February 2004. This point in time coincided with a period when ICT began to be introduced on massive scales in the Arab world, when the Intifada was at its peak and the Israeli occupation increasingly dominated people’s lives, and more political wars/uprisings erupted in the region.

Just before the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000 an important change occurred: the birth of the internet entailed a major transformation of communication and access to information for Palestinians. Furthermore, I was able to delineate some of the astounding new social/political possibilities of internet for a community under occupation and in exile. The inauguration of the PNA and its takeover of (part of) the telecom infrastructure and industry from Israel (as part of the 1993 Oslo Agreements), had an immediate impact on internet utilisation. 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. The research further evolved in a new historical phase when also the internal Palestinian political landscape was in great turmoil. Much changed after the death of President Yasser Arafat in 2004; the collapse of Fatah; and the subsequent election victory of Hamas. Along with the local and regional turmoil, internet usage further increased in this period. However, at the outset of this study I have addressed three contradictions that puzzled me, especially when embarking on ethnographic fieldwork to study the role of the internet in Palestinian context.

The overall research was captured in three tensions: mobility-immobility, space-place, resistance-oppression. Before engaging with these queries I first contextualised the themes and notions of this research. In Chapter One I offered theoretical and historical assessments. For research about the social/political impact of the internet in Palestine and the diaspora I build on earlier academic contributions regarding practices of political protest and mobilization and explored debates regarding the notion that ‘new’ media replaced ‘old’ styles of resistance. In Chapter Two I discussed the relevance of internet technology within wider media/social/economic frameworks. It was crucial to stress a dialectic approach in the analyses because despite the internet playing an important supportive role the everyday reality of Palestinian occupation proved that it cannot replace the face-to-face organisation and political struggle against (colonial) oppression. I found that the quality of internet was (like beauty) often in the eyes of the beholder. It was important to discuss the limitations of the ‘utopian vs. dystopian’ dichotomy about the politics of internet because different sides of the internet can be stressed depending on focus/interests. I
thus argue that internet might lead to submission as well as facilitate resistance, and I returned to this ‘dialectics of internet’ proposition in the final chapter.

The major problem facing Palestinians is the lack of freedom of movement, with both the flow of people and information strongly controlled. In Palestine, the internet is thus embedded in a colonial reality. Even after the Oslo peace agreements, Israel continued to stifle the information flow into and out of the Occupied Territories. Chapter Three presented this Palestinian immobility vis-à-vis virtual mobility (1st tension). Palestinian internet use clearly served a deeply felt need. Immobility and control was partly overcome when the internet enabled Palestinians to communicate with each other from different and previously unconnected places.

Several case studies showed that the internet provided different forms of entertainment which, considering the problems of isolation and alienation that many Palestinians suffer in the refugee camps, were also badly needed. More important than this ‘virtual escapism’; direct (re)connection of the diaspora also reinserted refugees into Palestinian politics. Furthermore, although collective national identity does not do away with internal differences, a strongly politicised/collective participation was often observable. Online mobility and online interaction with text and images of Palestine strengthen the sense of commonality/shared values. In addition, this special online interaction helped uncovered the value of offline place and territory.

The act of communicating was itself very significant because it meant connecting Palestinians to each other; possible on this scale for the first time since 1948. The internet provided an important and long-desired meeting point, and in due course, redefined the relation between territorial place and virtual space (2nd tension). Chapter Four examined how virtual spaces relate to territorial place and for this I engaged in the debate about nation-state/collective identity. In fact, despite often assumed ‘crises’ of the nation-state and notions of ‘de-territorialisation’, these appeared important elements in the imagination of the Palestinian homeland and community. The content of transnational communication, online discussions, and the diasporic traversals, led to a new way of constructing/imagining Palestinian national identity. Meanwhile, direct contact also led to ‘little scratches’ in the collective imagined community and provoked a re-examination of the ‘ideal’ Palestinian nation and national unity. This was for example apparent in the disappointment felt by refugees in Lebanon who discovered that not all Palestinians in the Occupied Territories were concerned with the plight and rights of refugees in the host countries. Nevertheless, much of the interaction with or about Palestine in cyber space also nurtured those sentiments with a nationalist/unified character. The construction of an imagined community is thus a continuous process that is linked to class, politics and mobility, a process that can go two ways: strengthening and challenging ideal notions.

While online mobility re-constructed national identity, internet use impacted the dynamics of Palestinian social relations. Cyber slang for example increased the level of grassroots participation, and the discussed Across Borders Project a good example of how grassroots initiatives (virtually) shape an imagined Palestinian nation. While generating knowledge about the present, the internet helped recover the past. The way
destroyed villages were displayed online revived and reconfigured this memory. It meant that a refugee in Lebanon could finally come across a site about his or her original village in Palestine through for example Palestine Remembered website. The amalgam of internet examples resulted in a concrete connection of politics, media, the virtual and the real; and further reinforced the dialectic (offline/online) focus in this study.

The fragmented Palestinian nation was being reconfigured by chat, emailing, and internet projects in which the diaspora often participated. Websites became the mediating ‘spaces’ through which the Palestinian nation is often imagined. Chapter Five unravelled the relation between national identity, mobility, and internet developments through a study of Palestinian websites and other virtual representations. The growing use of internet motivated the emergence of hundreds of Palestinian websites, often with a strategic aim to rehumanize Palestinians in front of an international audience. I categorized the collected Palestinian websites and divided them into websites with globalizing and localizing tendencies. The technological leaps from 1996–2006 in Palestine have played an important role in this evolution as I outline in the Palestinian Internet Time Table (Table 1). An eminent public relations strategy towards Western audiences, the Arabization of the interface, the .PS URL, and the spreading of Palestinian blogs all contributed to the overall groundbreaking markers.

But I was especially curious to know about the trajectories and practices behind the websites, i.e. their mode of operation, for instance when I discovered that online representations are embedded in latent and manifested forms of control. Particular popular websites among Palestinians, such as Hamas (Palestine-Info), were hardly referred to by the well-known (globalizing) websites. The prevailing style of Palestinian websites was secular/national, but due to the negatively biased views about Islam/ism (fused by a ‘politics of fear’/‘guilty by association’) the Palestinian online public sphere sometimes exemplifies a system of exclusion. Muslim/Islamist sources are sometimes considered a ‘distraction’ to the project of re-humanising Palestinians or mobilising international (i.e. Western) solidarity. Thus whereas offline/on the ground Hamas was clearly considered popular and sophisticated on the internet, social network analyses showed that online this was (initially) not acknowledged in terms of virtual linkages attributed to them by mainstream and globalizing websites.

The on the ground knowledge was especially possible through research in Internet Cafes, spaces/places that are at the crossroad of Palestinian internet and offline/online practices. Chapter Six investigated these important spaces and examined the everyday impacts of internet technologies in the diasporic contexts. Working in the camps also enabled me to see the (illegal) infrastructures and creative tapping of internet connection. But most importantly, these experiences showed me that ICT structures alter face-to-face participation of Palestinian internet users in internet cafes in particular. The ICs capture important aspects of the interlock between virtual and everyday life practices. I analysed the internet cafes as new offline public places. These new “contested spaces” promote social change, especially when seen through the prism of gender. Processes of change and agency by participation of women impose
new interpretations, and evidently were best examined in their local setting. Internet users constantly trespass the social/dominant boundaries, for example by flirting online and arranging offline rendezvous or engaging in hacktivism. Information about sexuality was not (anonymously) available at this scale before. The same dynamic counts for possibilities to access/participate in political activities.

Chapter Seven epitomized everyday resistance and the virtual Intifada through a political assessment of the internet (3rd tension). I portrayed how Palestinian political agency and struggle transcend into virtual reality. The competition over (potential) audiences (particularly in the West) is an important matter in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Dissemination of alternative information is therefore one of the most important political tools. A (more) independent journalism via internet media gave (pro-) Palestinian participants more democratic control over content and representation of news. I illustrated these tactical means of resistance by showing how Palestinians (try to) achieve their political demands through media activism via the internet, and the role Palestinian diasporas/solidarity activists play. This virtual agency is at the core of offline and online activist networks that mobilize in and/or for Palestine. I argue that internet technologies serve as part of the general Palestinian tools and repertoires of protest. Everyday internet resistance involves different levels varying from direct-action, media activism and solidarity projects; I have termed this blend of political engagement Cyber Intifada.

Moreover, as closures and military repression limited the possibility to organize public gatherings in Palestine, online debates/mobilization emerged even more. The internet became part of the general resistance in three ways: to disseminate information, to organize protest, and to attack the opponent. Hacktivism and other virtual battles/attacks between (pro-) Palestinians and (pro-) Israelis, clearly signify the internet a technological tool and a political weapon. However, equating Cyber Intifada and internet activism with anti-colonial struggle or grassroots resistance is a bridge too far; and even more in the context of occupation and exile. In sum: internet utilisation helps to contest but also assert status-quo power. This was an important conclusion and it therefore demanded a more in depth examination, which I presented in the final chapter.

Based on the increase of internet penetration rates and mushrooming internet cafes, the internet has become more ‘normalised’ than it was at the outset of the research in 2001. The case studies simultaneously highlight what internet means for a context that is still marked by Palestinian struggle for political self-determination and everyday survival. Chapter Eight therefore offered a critical conclusion about the potentials of the internet. The aim was to contribute to discussions regarding the politics of internet. I wanted to move beyond the general utopian/dystopian discourse that erupted from earlier internet research; my experiences finally made me see the internet as a blessing and a curse. This led to a dialectical (re)evaluation of the general pro’s and con’s of internet. Certain offline, on the ground, experiences cannot be transformed into virtual internet experiences, no matter how flashy or entertaining websites or internet games were; I also noticed that offline politics was crucial to
generate political commitment. For instance, whereas the construction of alternative political public spheres matured with the creation of discussion forums by popular political movements like Hamas and Fatah, it would not have been as interesting without the on the ground (successful) practices.

This emerging juxtaposition of the internet blessing and curse clarifies that internet politics witnessed an evolution from the somewhat cool internet activism with the 1990s Zapatista rebellion, to the post-9/11 context. A context that introduced a shift to more policing/monitoring (for example with the US Patriot Act) and use of the internet for surveillance and (preventive) attacks. On top of this rather general internet curse for activists, for Palestinians in particular, the Israeli occupation lead to greater difficulties and their forced exile severely hampers potential Palestinian grassroots resistance. In this paradoxical situation, I described the major internet blessing is the agency and space for civil disobedience; and the major curse what I metaphorically framed the Damocles sword. Thus the internet can be used for political activism, but sometimes (like a Damocles sword dangling above the computer) at the user’s own risks due to political monitoring or counter hacking.

And still, the Janus-faced character of the internet continues to display the democratic potential and decentralising impact of internet tactics. The internet has opened new arenas of contestation and accommodating dissident groups. In spite of a pro-Israeli logic and PR in the dominant political/media structures, there is a shift in public opinion, partly thanks to media activism and their counter-hegemonic discourses. Conclusively, as the occupation of Palestine continues, and because social/human phenomena depend on social/human push and pull factors, this is an ongoing development with an indecisive/open end.