Social media in the Gaza conflict

By Will Ward

January, 2009. Israel's assault on Gaza in response to Hamas rocket fire has returned social media to the forefront of Middle East politics. More than any previous round of Israeli-Palestinian fighting, Israel is using its military might to control media on the battlefield, while partisans of both sides strive to influence public opinion using social media.

As its air campaign ramped up in late December, the Israeli military debuted its own YouTube channel to broadcast clips of surveillance and airstrikes, eager to portray its weapons as precise and show off its technological command of the battlespace. Hamas has also sought to use the media. In Gaza, a group of Hamas fighters allowed Algerian journalist Zouheir Alnajjar to videotape the inside of their homemade rocket factory. In a gripping clip making the rounds in the blogosphere, we see the camera jerk suddenly as a masked man casually flicks a lighter to ignite a test spoonful of homemade rocket fuel.

While belligerents sought to telegraph their strength, groups supporting both Israel and the Palestinians also used social media to do just the opposite, inviting supporters to advertise their side's plight on the social networking site Facebook. Users were asked to "donate their status," that would automatically display an up-to-the-minute tally of the rockets hitting southern Israel or a running count of the Palestinian dead and wounded. When logging in to Facebook, friends and acquaintances of a 'status donor' would see a gripping reminder of the conflict, such as "9:25pm: 3 additional Hamas rockets hit Israel. Total today: 33. Total since the year 2000: 8706," in place of a mundane update like, "Jim is at the movies." The *Jerusalem Post* reported that 10,000 users signed up to display the "Qassam Count" in the conflict's first three days.

In a similar vein, one Israeli university set up what amounted to a social media rapid response team. The group called "Help Us Win" collected student volunteers at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, armed them with computers and talking points, and dispatched them to tell Israel's story in cyberspace. At the time of writing, however, their website and Twitter account seem to have been taken offline.

Government officials also got into the act. New immigrants were recruited by the Absorption Ministry to flood blogs in their native languages with "positive" talking

points, while Israeli officials held an online press conference using Twitter, a "microblog" service where all messages must adhere to a strict 140 character limit.

Gaza also intruded into a long-planned press conference held in the virtual world Second Life. During the event, Egyptian bloggers pitched questions about America's stance on the crisis at outgoing U.S. Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy James Glassman, or rather at his avatar, digitally rendered in an impossibly well-tailored suit and pixilated pocket square.

Media blackout

Social media are playing a growing role in the current conflict for several reasons. There is a natural increase in use of the technologies, especially in the Arab World as internet penetration rates continue to grow. The decades-festering Arab-Israeli conflict has built and galvanized large constituencies around the world who are eager to lend their side a hand in the media battle.

But above all, social media have advanced to the fore in this round of fighting because of Israel's decision to impose a media blackout on Gaza. Days before the beginning of operation "Cast Lead," foreign correspondents were barred from entering the territory. The government even prohibited Israeli soldiers from bringing in mobile phones – by now the medium of choice for leaks of embarrassing information the world over.

This throttling of the information supply was clearly designed to leave more space for Israel's government and media to supply the facts of the conflict. Also, no journalists means no journalist casualties, and thus one fewer pressure group arrayed against Israel in the court of world public opinion. In addition, holding reporters at bay just over the borders would leave them positioned to report stories favorable to Israeli framing – the smuggling tunnels under the Egyptian border and the steady stream of rockets falling on southern Israel.

Analysis on the role of new media in the Middle East has largely centered on how "citizen journalists" can now set the agenda for news outlets, and how social media users repackage, comment on, and distribute content in innovative ways. But with foreign press shut out, scarce electricity, and little internet infrastructure, the media dynamics in Gaza centered on a handful of Palestinian journalists who worked across a range of media formats to provide footage and primary reporting necessary for traditional and new media alike.

One journalist typifying this trend is Sameh Akram Habeeb. An employee of the Gaza branch of the Ramattah News Agency, Habeeb did stand-up reports for television syndication and was interviewed by a range of international media outlets. He complemented these with updates on his Gaza Today blog, which included a written summary of the day's news, photos uploaded to his Flickr account, and links to his video features on a sidebar.

Such convergence is not new, particularly in the Arab World, where journalists are less often barred from maintaining personal websites in the name of impartiality. What *is* different, is how the ban on journalists entering Gaza forced outsiders to rely almost exclusively on free agents like Habeeb who crisscross traditional and social media formats without a second thought.

Another important development has been decisions by TV outlets to make their raw footage available online for free. The Ramattan News Agency, for several days of the conflict, streamed an unedited video feed live on its website and Al Jazeera released a collection of tapes from Gaza online under a Creative Commons license. Al Jazeera's choice of a Creative Commons 3.0 license, which encourages editing, sharing and commercial and non-commercial distribution of the content, is a clear signal that the network hopes the material would find its widest possible audience via social media. Indeed, Creative Commons licensing was designed largely to encourage sharing of content over social media; it was hoped that giving producers more control over how their work is used online would prompt them to share more of it instead of applying the usual "all rights reserved."

But ultimately, social media could not replace the depth and breadth of coverage that would have been produced had Gaza been open to scores of international journalists in full crisis mode. What it did do, however, was provide new ways to amplify and distribute the trickle of information that escaped the blockade. These images and videos, depicting gruesome scenes of dead and wounded civilians, conveyed a reality of war not present in the sanitized smart bomb strikes on the Israeli YouTube channel.

Hits and misses

Not all of the attempts at using social media in this conflict were quite so successful. Individuals' use of Facebook to broadcast their support for either side has garnered a considerable amount of media attention, but David Faris points out how Facebook's low barriers to group formation tend to attract the support of individuals with relatively low commitment levels:

> Most times, joining a Facebook group is a one-and-done affair – users rarely return to the site of the group they formed, and often they have just joined the group to make some kind of political statement or to show solidarity with their friends.

During the Gaza campaign, the anonymous Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey echoed, if more bluntly, the point about users' low commitment levels to causes they support on Facebook. He attacked "Facebook status warfare" as

> ...a form of masturbatory self-congratulating cyber activism that doesn't really cost you any time or effort. I mean, it doesn't even require you to update your facebook status yourself, because the whole thing is freakin automated anyway. So, what's the point exactly?

Yet the use of status updates, as opposed to joining a group, *is* a notable development in the evolution of Facebook activism. When a user joins a group on Facebook, a single item appears at the top of his friends' "News Feed." Over time, this notice is pushed down by newer items until it finally disappears. By contrast, when a user "donates" his or her status to "Qassam Count," for example, the system will automatically generate a new feed item several times a day. This simple change multiplies the amount of items the user's friends see, and thus the amount of attention a given cause receives. In this case, the feature's automation makes it potentially a more powerful tool because these automatic status updates are an ongoing visible commitment, rather than the one off act of joining a group.

It is doubtful, however, that this tactic will be effective in the long run. Clearly its designers hope that seeing the Qassam count or the Palestinian death toll gradually creep up day by day will seep into a viewer's consciousness, multiplying the persuasive effect. But recent research on digital advertising suggests that users simply tune out repeated messages transmitted on social networking sites.

Governments also sought to cash-in on the free PR generated by social media but to considerably less success. Israel's press conference conducted over Twitter was widely panned as a gimmick. Just one of the "tweets" from the event quoted in Comops Journal shows why:

"We hav 2 prtct R ctzens 2, only way fwd through neogtiations & left Gaza in 05. y Hamas launch missiles not peace?"

What?

Under U.S. public diplomacy chief James Glassman's "Public Diplomacy 2.0" initiative, which seeks to use social media tools to influence foreign audiences, the American University in Cairo sponsored a press conference, held in the online virtual world Second Life, where a group of Egyptian bloggers could ask questions of Glassman in Washington. In the virtual reality of Second Life, each participant is represented by an avatar, or a customizable digital character.

On an ordinary day, the event would probably have been a mild success, a proof of concept that Americans were doing everything they could to reach out to audiences using electronic media. But then Gaza happened. The Second Life press conference went forward, nonetheless, on 12 January, the seventeenth day of the conflict. By then, Israel was tightening its grip on Gaza City, the Palestinian death toll had topped 900, and the Arab World was livid watching the carnage unfold on television. And there was Glassman's avatar – the top U.S. official for global strategic communications – reciting his talking points flanked by a green-skinned creature that looked like the product of a Klingon's one night stand with Bob Marley.

This unsettling incident illustrates a key disadvantage that governments face when adopting social media – slowness. By their nature, social media thrive on quick reactions and short attention spans, an area in which governments tend not to excel. The virtual press conference with Glassman was planned months in advance with the help of an American consultancy specializing in strategic communication and social networks. Yet once set in motion, parties had an incentive to follow through with the project even though the war's outbreak had shifted the context dramatically.

Are we winning – and if so what?

Dynamics of any one medium aside, who is winning the larger media war? It depends on who you ask.

In Abu Dhabi's flagship newspaper *The National*, communications professor Abeer Najjar, argued that Israel's multimedia PR push has allowed it to portray itself as the victim, defending its citizens against an aggressive Hamas.

Citing polls that show "less robust than usual" American public support for Israel and increasing criticism of the state in U.S. media, the *Economist* declared, "Despite devoting unparalleled attention to the media, Israel is losing the propaganda war."

Amid these claims and counter-claims, the way forward is to concentrate on audience. Instead of a grand, amalgamated "media war," it makes more sense to think about how different audiences, determined by language, politics, nationality or access to media, are influenced – or not.

Within Israel and the Arab World, public opinion is, not surprisingly, polarized, for and against the war respectively. A recent poll showed that 94% of Israeli Jews, who comprise about four fifths of the country's population, supported the government's decision to launch the assault. And if the crisis coverage on Arabic media and the protests erupting around the Middle East are not enough proof of popular opposition to Israel's actions, today you can also check people's blogs, tweets, and Facebook pages for more. Even in Arab countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia whose leaders blame Hamas for the conflict, statements against the group are always couched in support for Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian people.

With regional public opinion unlikely to change, the extensive use of social media, nearly all of it in English, to support one's side and tell its story is aimed at influencing international audiences and decision makers. When the bombs are falling, America, the UN and the EU, hold more diplomatic cards critical to hammering out the ceasefire arrangement, and are thus the focus of the bulk of media activism.

But if the 2006 Israel-Hizbullah war is any guide, when this round of violence winds down, the fighters will return to face their toughest critics at home, to relive every minute and second-guess every decision. Did Hamas overplay its hand by not accepting a ceasefire sooner? Did Israel's fighting prowess win it any strategic gains? On these sorts

of questions, Arab and Israeli public opinion is more divided and individuals more persuadable. Let's just hope no one tries debating these questions in 140 characters or less.

Will Ward *is managing editor of* Arab Media & Society and a Cairo-based freelance journalist.