

Digital Shahid - Palestinians Covering Occupied Palestine: From Broadcast Media to Citizen Journalism

In January 2007, a video a few minutes long sparked stark outrage in Israel. At first it circulated on the Internet and soon after was broadcast by several TV channels around the world. It showed a woman from the Jewish settlement of Tel Rumeida, in the Old City of Hebron, West Bank, cursing a young Palestinian girl. The woman, later identified as Yifat Alkobi, was one of the 500 radical settlers dwelling in the heart of one of the most volatile Palestinian cities, where, despite the presence of almost 2,000 Israeli soldiers, the constant friction between the Jewish and the Arab communities has created a highly explosive situation. The incident was filmed with a handy camera by the sixteen-year-old daughter of the Abu Eische family from within the metallic grid that protects her house from the frequent attacks of neighboring settlers. The footage captured the woman shouting to the girl's sister the Arabic and Hebrew term for whore, *sharmouta*. The word became a label for the video and it was referred to as such in the debates that stirred up Israeli public opinion. Because of the ban on traveling to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, that footage gave many Israelis their first ever insight into an aspect of Palestinian daily life under occupation. For them, it was a shock. For B'tselem, a Jerusalem-based advocacy organization which relies on a network of activists campaigning for the respect of human rights in the Occupied Territories, and which produced and posted the video online, it was a success. Then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz spoke publicly about the *sharmouta* video, condemning the behavior of the settler and ordering an investigation. Moreover, a ministerial committee was established to address issues in Hebron, highlighting the so-called 'quiet transfer' of Palestinians from the Old City, which has turned the once vibrant area into a ghost town. Since then, this sort of grassroots reporting, otherwise called citizen journalism¹ and made possible by the penetration of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the emergence of Web 2.0, has enabled and empowered many Palestinians, for the first time, to show their daily plight: to be the makers, and not only the protagonists, of the headlines.

¹ An alternative definition is grassroots journalism, and it is based on the assumption that people without a professional background in journalism can use electronic tools and the Internet to produce and disseminate news or simply fact-check what is reported in the mainstream media.

This article focuses on the emergence of Palestinian citizen journalism and its impact on the Palestinian national narrative and on the perception of the conflict since the First Intifada, arguing that new and more democratic practices of communication are creating space for exploring peaceful forms of resistance against the occupation. To this aim, we first discuss the stakes in the media war between the Israelis and the Palestinians. In the second part, we examine the evolution of Arab broadcast media between the First and the Second Intifada. Then we focus on the rise of Palestinian broadcast media and how their news coverage has affected the course of the events. In the fourth part, we explore the way in which these broadcast media have contributed to shaping and feeding the icon of the martyr. In the fifth part, we analyze how the Internet in the Occupied Territories has empowered a new generation of Palestinians raised in the social and political milieu which emerged from the Second Intifada, making it possible to challenge the dominant narrative of the conflict. Eventually, we describe a best practice in which ICTs are being employed by Palestinian and Israeli advocacy organizations to denounce human rights abuses in the Occupied Territories, enhancing the accountability of the Israeli army and seeking to bridge the gap between Israeli and Palestinian civil societies.

Media War

No other conflict in the world attracts so much attention as the 60-year conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians over the same land. It is beyond the scope of this paper to inquire into the reasons for this prominence in coverage, but practitioners often mention two elements in their analysis: the high symbolic value of the places where this struggle is fought and the powerful lobbies in the West and in the Arab world interested in having the story running (McGregor-Wood and Schenker, 2003)²

The awareness of having all the cameras pointed at them has fostered the strong belief, among both Israelis and Palestinians, that the “struggle over the news media can be just as important as the battle on the ground” (Wolfsfeld, 2003: 5). Media serve different functions, even though both sides pursue the same purpose – attracting public sympathy for their cause, underlining their own rightness and the enemy's brutality – as they compete, in front of an

² According to Andrew Steele, the BBC's Middle East Bureau Chief, another reason is the fact that “people here are like us. It's racist, but we care more about Jews and Arabs being shot dead than we do about Bangladeshis who drown in a flood, because that's much more remote, it's much more distant”(interview by McGregor-Wood and Schenker, 2003)

international audience, for the role of the victim. Israel is concerned with convincing its Western allies of the legitimacy of its actions, exerting effective *damage control* to reduce the exposure of the Israeli army's operations or, when inevitable, promptly framing them according to the Israeli government's official story line. At the core of this attitude is the belief, widespread in Israel, that the international press holds a strong bias against the Jewish state and its policies towards the Palestinians. Conversely, Palestinians see the media as an *equalizer* to be used to compensate for their objective weakness with a powerful tool to enlist the support of third parties, especially amongst European civil society and in the Arab world (ib: 6). In this often gruesome contest of suffering and pain, visual communication plays a crucial role. Palestinian leadership in particular has been accused in many instances, especially by pro-Israeli commentators, of pushing youths to clash with the IDF when cameras are present to gain international sympathy (Podhoretz, 2001). As a matter of fact, striking images, especially involving kids and teenagers, have indeed achieved the goal of stirring emotions, in particular at the early stages of the first Intifada, when the eruption of the conflict was covered by Israeli and non-Arab TV stations. Back then, footage showing Israeli soldiers using huge stones to crush the bones of two young Palestinians in handcuffs gained international support for the uprising (Andoni, 2001) – support which partially evaporated following the waves of suicide bombings that hit Israeli public places after the 1993 Declaration of Principles (DOP). No images, though, have ended up symbolizing the pit of despair in which the peace process had fallen less than ten years after the Oslo agreement as much as those of the child Mohammed al-Durrah shot dead in his father's lap and of two Israeli soldiers mob-lynched in Ramallah. Following this last event, the Israeli government prohibited its citizens to travel to the Occupied Territories. The Israeli army changed its attitude towards foreign reporters and crews to such an extent that, in the first year of the al-Aqsa intifada, journalists were shot at (Enderlin, 2003). The distinction between information and propaganda became increasingly nuanced, even in Israel, where foreign media had some freedom of movement to cover the army's operations within the Occupied Territories. The Israeli Government Press Office (GPO) ceased to issue permits and press cards to Palestinian reporters, cameramen and fixers working for international broadcasters. According to Charles Enderlin, then correspondent of France 2, whose crew filmed the killing of Mohammad al-Durrah, “the general atmosphere created by the sentiment that the foreign press is the 'enemy of Israel', led to some companies and journalists being individually targeted” (ib.: 62). During Operation Defensive Shields, in March-April 2002, the IDF cordoned off entire areas of the West Bank, denying the media access to the front line. Despite the prohibition, some

journalists succeeded in sneaking into theaters of military operations and were able to film the events, although only from the Palestinian side. This eventually turned into a blow for the Israeli army, which had censored the footage of the combats filmed by the only Israeli crew allowed in the areas (ib.: 63). Since then, the army has invested considerable resources in honing its own image, setting up training in media handling for soldiers dispatched to the Occupied Territories and creating a combat unit of “fighting cameramen” carrying video cameras in the field to report the Israeli side of the story. The spin doctors in charge of *Hasbara*, as Israelis call information for the outside (Said, 2001), have thus elaborated techniques and procedures to prevent the leak of details that could undermine the Israeli army's boasts about its ethical code of conduct. Two techniques in particular are worth mentioning: the first is the label 'low signature' for operations which can hardly be captured by the press. The second is awareness of 'news cycles' when carrying out delayed retaliations, based on the assumption that an immediate Israeli armed response to a Palestinian attack would draw all news coverage, turning the victim into the aggressor in the eyes of international public opinion. The subtler and most common tactic, though, remains putting death on or off camera according to whether the casualties are on one's own side or on the enemy side, dignifying the former with detailed biographies and depriving the latter even of the names.

As mentioned above, the first Intifada was covered only by Israeli and foreign broadcast journalists. Local journalists, employed in print media, were hired to work with the correspondents as translators, field guides, fixers and TV producer assistants, roles to which they attributed patriotic value. When leading a reporter to the place of a major clash or arranging interviews with politicians and fighters, their purpose was often to support the national cause and further the storyline of the Palestinian David against the Israeli Goliath. As a side effect, this collaboration led to the development of local expertise in an industry that, during the same period, was undergoing profound changes in the entire Middle East. Journalism training courses sprung up in the Occupied Territories and many young Palestinians started looking at the journalist profession not only as a viable career, but also as a way to fight for a free and independent Palestine.

At the local level, a number of cable broadcasting initiatives were launched in 1987 in the north of the West Bank. The only national broadcaster Palestinians could ever remember, Jordanian TV, had been replaced after 1967 by Israeli television stations, whose programs

were in Hebrew except for a couple of hours every day when they switched to Arabic (El-Obeidi, n.d.). Only those who lived on the hilltops could receive Syrian TV and get a sense of how the Arab world was covering the occupation, probably with a hint of disappointment. Until 1991 Arab television stations shared a similar government-run model, whose main function was to be a tool of propaganda, controlled by the national ministries of information. The agenda was imposed on the editors and, as for the coverage of events related to the Occupied Territories, the only news worth reporting was often that in which it was possible to mention the particular regime's leader. The role of the Palestinians in the struggle was overshadowed by the leadership speaking out in their favor. The guideline for every Arab newsroom was: *Never show the Palestinian problem to be bigger than the leader who claims to speak and act on behalf of Palestinians* (Rinnawi, 2003: 59). In September 1991, the private broadcaster MBC went on the air in Arabic from studios in London (Ayish, 2001). It targeted the Arab world in a Western style and paved the way for other broadcasters. Satellite TV networks were created in Italy, in Lebanon and in the Gulf states, where Qatar-based al-Jazeera started broadcasting in 1996. The goals changed, as these private broadcasters no longer served a government-dictated agenda but were profit-driven and therefore eager to please a more demanding Arab audience. The Palestinian issue did not lose its appeal. On the contrary, broadcasting the suffering of the Palestinians not only burnished the pan-Arab credentials of the transnational Arab TV networks but was also successful in terms of viewers. Nationalism paid off, especially if it was associated with sensational images and flamboyant language. A new rhetoric thrived on the news coverage carried by Arab media, which made the second Intifada “the first televised conflict where Arab transnational TVs set the agenda for Arab (and often Israeli) audiences” (Rinnawi: 57). If the conflict was reframed as the “al-Aqsa Intifada”, it was due essentially to Arab satellite TVs, which adopted the powerful symbol of the al-Aqsa mosque to underline the connection between Ariel Sharon's walk on the Temple Mount and the ensuing violence, thus encouraging the identification of the entire Arab and Muslim world with the Palestinians.

“Reconciliatory news is no news”

A series of journalist workshops held in Jerusalem and Ramallah led, in 1994, to the creation of the Palestinian Broadcasting Company (PBC), the first Palestinian TV born with the main goal of representing the official position of the recently created Palestinian National

Authority (PNA) on the peace process. It was a government-run media outlet which exhibited since its inception a disturbing paradox: although it was an emanation of a leadership which had just signed a commitment to peace, it was still a militant media for which “reconciliatory news (was) no news.”(Dajani, 2003: 40) The news coverage focused on drumming up international support for the Palestinian cause, “giving only skimpy attention to the burning political and economic challenges facing the Oslo peace process” (ib.). Objectivity once again succumbed to the concern of appealing to the audience in the name of the interest of the nation – a nation which had never ceased to be at war. This attitude was amplified by the spread of local TV stations, which had reached the number of thirty at the time of the second Intifada. The urge to promote a political stand took over the one of providing a public service. Furthermore, the influence of local political forces, often opposed to Fatah, imposed on the news coverage a slant not only against the DOP, but also against the Palestinian leadership which had signed an agreement with the Israeli occupiers, even when the IDF was withdrawing from the urban areas. Israel remained the enemy and, in order to promote popular mobilization against the occupation, exaggerating facts and figures seemed legitimated by the decades of inhumane practices (Daraghmeh, 2003: 14). However, it is worth noting that, before the al-Aqsa Intifada, there were some windows of opportunity for reconciliation, and some cautious steps were taken in that direction. In the middle of the 1990s, when Hamas and Islamic Jihad started sponsoring suicide attacks, most broadcasting and print media criticized those actions and their orchestrators, portraying the people who had carried out the attacks as desperate (ib.). This tendency mirrored a public opinion in which, according to official Palestinian figures, support for suicide bombing was limited to around 20 percent (ib.). The popular backing for attacks on Israeli civilians jumped to 80 percent following the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada, an attitude largely reflected in (and fueled by) the media which, in return, pursued a storyline consistent with the dominant narrative. The gradual erosion of Fatah's dominance in the 1990s, which culminated with the victory of Hamas in the 2006 elections and the takeover of Gaza in 2007, produced a polarization in media which nevertheless left little space for critical voices. Not only at the peaks of the violence, but also in the interlude between the establishment of the PNA and Sharon's provocative visit to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, media outlets stood firm on the premise that there was “only one story worth covering” (ib.: 13). The backdrop to this assumption was not only the fact that the Israeli occupation affects every aspect of Palestinian daily life, but also the heavy censorship of particularly sensitive internal issues, unless they are raised as politically motivated attacks by one side on the other, such as corruption, the

many shadows on the leadership of Yasser Arafat, or taboos such as the one-state solution³. The censorship, though, is not merely political but also social, and revolves around the very possibility of offering the audience views which challenge the dominant narrative. That was especially the case when Palestinian cities were reoccupied and the IDF launched operation Defense Shield in 2002: media rallied rank and file behind the official line. An embryonic Palestinian peace movement was inhibited from emerging and gaining visibility, squeezed between the brutality of Israel, which exacerbated what started as a non-violent resistance, and the response of the Palestinian armed groups, which flourished over pictures of graphic violence and inflammatory statements (Gordon, 2010). Authoritative voices calling for an end to militant violence were marginalized in the media and war dominated the Palestinian public discourse as the only reaction to the occupation. Even intellectuals such as Ramzy Baroud, editor-in-chief of the *Palestinian Chronicle*, deemed non-violence to be “doomed for failure” adding that the “savagery of the enemy is what in fact determines the level of resistance”(Eid, 2008).

From the witness to the martyr, and back

One icon in particular cast its shadow over the national mythology: the *shahid*, the “witness” or 'martyr', a status bestowed on every Palestinian shot by Israeli fire (Daraghmeh, 2003). The icon of the martyr was part of the gallery of heroic symbols that had underpinned the national narrative since 1967 (Kimmerling and Migdal, 2003: 243). When, back in the first Intifada, foreign media broadcast pictures of children shot while throwing stones, they contributed to fixing that image in the national mythology. The icon proved to be successful in attracting the world's sympathy. Later, posters of suicide bombers with the picture of the al-Aqsa mosque as background became ubiquitous in cities and refugee camps, making the martyr a role model for many children. Even in the aftermath of the al-Aqsa Intifada, when the main Palestinian political forces rejected suicide bombings, martyrdom remained a tenet of Palestinian nationalism, as a way to avenge personal humiliations sublimated at national level (Eid, 2008). The *shahid* was seen, by a generation increasingly disillusioned with its political leadership, as a hero worthy of respect. It is worth pointing out, though, that the 11

³ In June 2009, the Brussel-based International Federation of Journalists condemned a crackdown against media in Palestine after both the PNA and Hamas ordered their security forces in the West Bank and in Gaza to detain a number of journalists accused of siding with the rival faction. One month after, the PNA ordered to close down the al-Jazeera desk in Ramallah because of allegations of 'incitement and false information.' The Qatar-based TV was accused of holding a bias against the PNA for having aired innuendos on the participation of President Abbas in a plot to kill late leader Arafat. The ban was lifted few days later (IFJ, 2009).

journalists and media workers killed in the Occupied Territories since 1992 were also mourned as martyrs (CPJ, 2009). The list includes Italian photographer Raffaele Ciriello, shot dead by an Israeli tank in Ramallah in 2002, and British cameraman James Miller, killed in Rafah in 2003. The names of Mazen Dana and Mazen al-Tumeizi, for instance, are still popular today amongst Palestinian youths despite the fact that the two Palestinian cameramen did not die in the Occupied Territories and were not killed by the Israelis. Instead, they were killed in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, where they were covering the war against the US-led invasion for, respectively, Reuters and Al Arabiya, and set an example as martyrs armed with nothing but a video camera. They became symbols of the generation of Palestinian media operators who learned to cover conflicts in the field, amid bullets and teargas, and who are still employed by transnational media corporations in other Middle East war theaters because of their high professional standards, their language skills and, not less important in the media industry, their competitive costs.

Towards an Electronic Intifada

The distrust of mainstream media in the Occupied Territories is intimately related to the loss of faith in a political leadership that seems focused on its internecine feud rather than on improving the present and the future of the younger generations. The rift along party lines that has divided Palestinian society since the rise of Hamas is echoed in the media, where ideological allegiances have often sidelined objective reporting to the extent that, as it has been argued, “the war of media narratives is so acute that it may have been the single most important factor in deepening the divisions that led to the 2007 battle between Hamas and Fatah in Gaza” (Cherkaoui, 2009).

Since then, however, the Internet has had extraordinary success as an alternative source of information despite the lack of infrastructure and the harsh living conditions in the Occupied Territories, especially since, following the victory of Hamas in 2006, the international community cut more than one billion dollars in aid to the PNA. The stunning growth of Internet users in the Occupied Territories has been explained with the “rising desire, especially among the young people, to engage in public debate across a wide range of political and social issues” (Zayyan and Carter, 2009: 85). ICT innovations have allowed many young Palestinians to make sense of the reality of the occupation and of Palestinian politics and society through the lens of their daily life, instead of the parties' official lines

conveyed by the mainstream media. A quick glance at some figures can help draft the landscape in which a new generation of citizen journalists has emerged, able for the first time to challenge the dominant politically imposed narratives with their accounts. Amongst Palestinians, the percentage of literate adults stands at 92 percent of the population, while in the rest of the Arab world the figure is 60 percent (UNICEF, 2007). Despite the relatively high cost of access to the Internet in the Occupied Territories, a poll carried out in 2005 by the Alternative Information Center, an Israeli/Palestinian advocacy organization, on a sample of 1,040 Palestinian adults has reported that 37.6 percent of them regularly use the web (AIC, 2005). Paradoxically, the fast growth of Internet penetration has been made possible by the weakness of the central government, unable either to steer developments in ICT or impose filters on the free circulation of information. As the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information points out,

There are no Palestinian laws covering the dissemination of information on the Internet, or to [organize] the workings of Internet cafes. [...]It seems that this remarkable freedom perhaps has more to do with technical reasons than respect for freedom of expression (HRinfo, 2005)

A fresh grassroots movement, animated especially by young people, has filled this vacuum of power with personal views about politics and resistance to the occupation. An arena underpinned by alternative news agencies, blogs and forums of discussion is proving successful not only in connecting Palestinians from all across the Occupied Territories, allowing the ones in Gaza to leave their prison at least virtually and keeping alive the bonds with the Palestinian diaspora, but also in exploring new alternatives and stimulating a collective reflection on what it means to be a Palestinian. This goal is carried out through news websites, the most influential being Electronic Intifada (EI), and blogs in Arabic and in English. EI is a non-profit organization based in the US and in the Occupied Territories launched in 2001 by four activists to cover the al-Aqsa Intifada with the purpose of reporting the events from a Palestinian perspective and counterbalancing what was perceived as a strong pro-Israeli bias in US media. Through a network of local contributors and a section called 'Diaries: Live from Palestine', it has been in some critical moments the only voice from the ground, such as for instance during Operation Defensive Shield, when the accounts of some residents of Ramallah succeeded in breaking the siege imposed by the Israeli army. EI's website acts also as a 'cyber clearinghouse' to empower local and international activists with

links to reliable figures, relevant international legal documents, human rights reports, UN resolutions and map of settlements (Zayyan and Carter, 2009: 88). Another popular news website, Ramallah Online, was crucial in drumming up the protest against the PLO's failure, in October 2009, to approve the Goldstone report over Israeli and Palestinian responsibilities during Operation Cast Lead. Amongst the most popular Palestinian blogs in English, four are worth mentioning: BethlehemGhetto, Stranger Than Fiction, Contemplating from Gaza and From Gaza with Love. The first is authored by a group of international and local activists based in Bethlehem: its main goal is to relate political facts and everyday events, always maintaining a focus on human and civil rights. The other three were all launched, interestingly enough, by women, Dana Shalash from Ramallah, Heba Zayyan and Mona el-Farra from Gaza. Their distinctive voices tackle daily life under occupation from different perspectives (Dana is a teacher and writes about young students and their expectations for the future; Heba is a journalist and Mona is a physician), but they share the same concern for gender issues and the same belief that bearing witness (as shahada, in its original meaning) can break the siege and reach out to the world (ib.).

Shooting back

In 2007, B'tselem launched Shooting Back, a project aimed at empowering Palestinian local communities through a basic idea: distributing video cameras to film human rights violations perpetrated by settlers or the Israeli army. According to Oren Yakobovich, former coordinator of B'tselem's video department, the project stemmed from frustration at being unable to grab the attention of the public through the periodic reports that the NGO had been producing since its foundation in 1989 (interview on Democracy Now, 26/12/2007). The organization focused on the most sensitive areas of the West Bank, especially in the proximity of settlements. The first choice fell inevitably on the Old City of Hebron, squatted by radical Jewish settlers and occupied by the Israeli army, where the few Palestinian families left are targets of daily violence. When the 16-year-old daughter of the Abu Eische family submitted the first tape to the B'tselem local representative, she could not imagine the impact that it would have produced, but one piece of footage she had filmed was bound to spark a national debate. The sharmouta video proved that even a teenager could react effectively to violence, if armed with a video camera and supported by a civil society willing to listen. Since then, B'tselem has collected 1,500 hours of footage that have been broadcast worldwide and have contributed to highlighting the settlement issue as one of the main hindrances to the peace process, especially after another video showed masked settlers beating up a Palestinian

shepherd in the South Hills of Hebron. Eighty cameras were distributed in the West Bank and, since 2009, 18 in Gaza. The initiative has attracted considerable attention in Israel because the videos provided evidence to 84 complaints filed by B'tselem and have led to the opening of 15 investigations. More importantly, this evidence was provided by the same Palestinians who called for the Israeli government to enforce the rule of law in the Occupied Territories against settler violence. In Gaza, the assignment for the teenagers who received the cameras was simply to show their lives. Videos about hip-hop in the refugee camps, working in the smuggling tunnel or sport in the Strip – footage that a professional journalist would never be able to film – were posted on Ynet, the biggest Israeli news website, under the headline 'Gaza: an Inside look', raising critiques and praise. To people commenting “You're giving a platform to our enemies!” others replied “It is moving to see life on the other side of the barrier. They're human beings just like us” (Bronner, 2010). Grassroots reporting is thus playing a role that mainstream media had long failed to fulfill: it is acting as a *humanizer* for both sides. As Awatif Aljadili, a TV producer from Gaza, declared in a recent interview to the New York Times:

“For a long time, we thought that people outside Gaza hated us. [...] Then we realized that they just don't know us. We needed to reach out. Peace between countries starts with good relations between individuals. We have to talk with each other. But many here are afraid of talking with Israelis. They will be accused of being spies.” (ib.)

Over the years, B'tselem has consolidated its reputation amongst Palestinians, to the extent that nowadays it receives an increasing number of requests by communities all across the Occupied Territories willing to contribute to Shooting Back⁴. In Hebron and the surrounding areas, cameras today play a dissuasive role against settler violence to the point that people always carry their video recorders, even though they are not working. Considered 'tools of pacific resistance', these simple handy cameras are shaping a fresh icon in the Palestinian national narrative: a *shahid*, a witness, able to merge the traditional Palestinian *sumud*, the steadfastness which characterized the passive endurance of a nation of refugees, with a sapient use of ICTs to fashion creative responses to the occupation.

Conclusion

⁴ Interview with Yoav Gross, video coordinator at B'tselem, 15/12/2009

The Palestinian tragedy has often been narrated from outside. The images crafted by the media had the purpose of appealing to the world, in the case of children throwing stones, or provoke repulsion, in the case of the suicide-bomber. Today, ICTs are serving the efforts of their respective civil societies to bridge the gap, allowing them to mirror each other in their most human dimension. They may even be contributing to defusing the violence and empowering civil society to stand up for human rights. The citizen journalism made possible by B'tselem video project conveys the possibility of a shared space in which both Israelis and Palestinians fight together against abuses.

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