

CHAPTER SIX

Human Rights AND Wrongs: Blogging News OF Everyday Life IN Palestine

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Citizen journalism has only very recently begun to develop in the Arab World. Its growth has been particularly slow in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs), where access to the internet has been severely limited due to declining economic conditions since the beginning of the al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000. Exacerbating this situation was the election of a Hamas-led Palestinian National Authority (PNA) government in 2006 (and Hamas's success in regional elections in Gaza in 2007). Some members of the international community proceeded to impose a number of restrictions on the newly elected government, the most serious of which was cutting off certain financial aid. The EU cut \$600 million per year and the US \$460 million (Pan, 2006). Life in the OPTs, especially in Gaza, where the popularity of Hamas was highest, quickly began to deteriorate, affecting the economic, political, and social infrastructure. By the end of 2006, the official unemployment level stood at 30%, while unofficial figures suggest that a mere 31% of working-age people have some form of employment (Hever, 2007).

Despite such political and economic obstacles, citizen journalism is now experiencing extraordinary growth that is being driven, in part, by a rising desire, especially among young people, to engage in public debate across a wide range of political and social issues (Beckerman, 2007; Talaat, 2006). Also significant in this, according to Hani Jabsheh of the Arab news service Al Bawaba, is the fact that mainstream Palestinian news media are widely perceived to be

politically biased (cited in Glaser, 2005). Across the Arab world, most local newspapers and broadcast news programs are either directly or indirectly state controlled, and thus often subject to strict censorship. In this context, it is often difficult for mainstream journalists to challenge prevailing political and religious orthodoxies.

To better understand the current state of Palestinian citizen journalism, we begin by briefly exploring the cultural context within which bloggers operate. We focus specifically on Palestine's high literacy levels and how they are linked to increases in internet use. Given the fact that mainstream, predominantly Arabic media appear to have little influence outside the region, we turn our attention to an examination of the influential English-language alternative news website Electronic Intifada (EI) and, more specifically, citizen journalism provided through its section "Diaries: Live from Palestine." From there, we briefly consider the contribution of two citizen journalism sites created by bloggers living in different parts of the West Bank—Bethlehem Bloggers and Stranger than Fiction. Each represents a different form of citizen journalism, as we outline later in this chapter. We then turn to Heba Zayyan's citizen journalist blog, *Contemplating from Gaza*. Departing from the usual conventions of academic writing, we include Zayyan's views about her work as a citizen journalist in her own words. The chapter concludes by assessing the role of citizen journalism in widening public debates on the Middle East conflict and in highlighting the ways in which such reporting bears witness to its human consequences.

LITERACY LEVELS AND INTERNET USE

While only 60% of adults across the Arab countries are literate, in Palestine this figure is 92% (UNICEF, 2007). The importance of education is widely recognized among the Palestinian population, and there is a determination to make the most of new information technologies for this purpose. The cost of internet access in the OPTs, about US \$25 per month according to Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (HRinfo, 2006), is extremely high in relation to the average monthly household income of about \$300 (Global Policy Network, 2006). Even so, the internet market is growing rapidly. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority government is exceptionally weak, and as such it is unable to impose tight controls over personal internet use. On this point, human rights representatives from the note:

There are no Palestinian laws covering the dissemination of information on the Internet, or to [organize] the workings of Internet cafés. In addition, there are no

reports about any kind of official control over web content or rules declaring what constitutes legitimate activities on the Internet. It seems that this remarkable freedom perhaps has more to do with technical reasons than respect for freedom of expression. (2006)

In contrast, an Egyptian court gave the so-called Egyptian blogger, a 22-year-old former law student by the name of Abdel Karim Suleiman (known online as “KarimAmer”), a four-year jail sentence in February 2007 “for insulting Islam and the president.” Hafiz Abour Saada, who represents the Egyptian Human Rights Organization, has stated that this verdict sent a “strong message to all bloggers who are put under strong surveillance” (cited in BBC News Online, February 22, 2007).

Internet access and use across the Middle East currently stands at approximately 10% of the population (Internet World Stats, 2007). The OPTs compare favorably with a figure of 7.9%. In 2004, a Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) report affirmed that 9.2% of Palestinian households had access to the internet. The following year, the Alternative Information Center (Palestine/Israel) polled 1,040 adults across the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, reporting that 37.6% of those surveyed claimed to use the internet, out of which 23.7% use it on a daily basis (AIC, 2005). Internet access is now growing at a steady pace. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the high levels of literacy in the region, one of the key types of usage is knowledge acquisition for education, discussion, and news.

NEWS WEBSITES AND CITIZEN JOURNALISM BLOGS

One of the most influential English-language news websites reporting on the situation in the OPTs is the EI—claiming to be “Palestine’s Weapon of Mass Instruction.” Based in the United States and the OPTs, it was launched on March 8, 2001, as a non-profit venture. EI was set up by four activists: Ali Abunimah, Arjan el Fassed, Laurie King-Irani, and Nigel Parry, whose paths crossed in 1998 on a Palestinian email list. As King-Irani recalls, “We quickly became cyber-friends...writing to each other regularly to express our dismay at the continuing lack of critical media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the persistence of US and Israeli efforts to achieve ‘peace’ while bypassing any question of justice and all instruments of international law” (King-Irani, 2001). Shortly after the al-Aqsa Intifada began in September 2000, Parry suggested to the others that what was urgently needed was a website (in English) that would centralize information about what was happening in Palestine to counter what they saw as a strongly pro-Israel slant in US and other Western

news coverage. To do so, it would be essential to have fact sheets providing information that activists needed to challenge mainstream representations of the conflict, locally, nationally, and internationally. The four also decided that the site should become a “cyber-clearinghouse” of links to relevant international legal documents, human rights reports, UN resolutions, maps of settlement building, verifiable statistics on deaths and injuries, to support activists (King-Irani, 2001).

To further support alternative media reporting, the EI team established a citizen journalism section on the website called “Diaries: Live from Palestine,” launched in April 2002. Developed partly as a response to Israel’s “Operation Defensive Shield,” a large-scale military intervention that began that month in Ramallah (the most extensive since the Six Day War in 1967) that was accompanied by barring journalists’ entry to the city, the “Diaries” offered “continually updated and dramatic accounts from local residents detailing life under a punishing curfew and military invasion. For a period of two weeks, these were literally the only voices heard from Ramallah” (EI, 2006). Since then, the section has become a regular feature, offering almost daily citizen journalist reports (professional journalists occasionally contribute to the section as well), written by people living in or visiting the OPTs. Frequently they are the personal reports of NGO workers such as those by Anna Balzter, a volunteer with the International Women’s Peace Service in the West Bank. Balzter’s diaries from Nablus during the week of March 12, 2007, for example, are moving accounts that help to humanize the suffering felt by those directly affected by Israel’s operation “Hot Winter,” which began a fortnight earlier (Katz, 2007). In her diaries from Nablus, posted in installments over a number of days, Balzter talks about the difficulties she has been facing in going into the Old City to deliver food and medical supplies to families living under strict curfew and thus unable to leave their homes. In her entry of March 14, entitled “Nablus invasion diary III: Resistance, hypocrisy and dead men walking,” Balzter reports:

Once when the army stopped me and Firas from UPMRC from entering part of the OldCity with bread, Firas waited ten minutes and then said, “Anna, come with me.” He grabbed as many bags as he could carry, and began walking past the jeeps. I grabbed 12 pounds of bread and scrambled after him past the soldiers, who had come out of their jeeps and were yelling, “Hey! Stop! What are you doing? We said you can’t enter!” Firas kept walking steadily and I turned around to the soldiers. “We’re delivering bread to hungry people. What are you going to do, shoot us?” They were speechless and held their fire. (Balzter, 2007)

Further forms of citizen journalism are made available through the EI website, including blogs written by citizens living in the West Bank and Gaza, as well

as by Palestinians and supporters of Palestine living in other countries. Authors often declare that, by writing in English, it is their hope that their reporting will prove to have a greater international impact on global public opinion about Palestine.

The importance of reaching a global audience is stated in the “So, who are we? And what is the point of a Bethlehem Blog?” section on the Bethlehem Bloggers site, launched on March 20, 2005. Specifically, these bloggers are “Palestinians and internationals who are living in the Bethlehem region, and who want to tell the world what it is like to be living in occupied territory, under an economic siege, encircled by a wall and military checkpoints: what it is like to live in a Palestinian Ghetto” (BethlehemGhetto.blogspot.com). The site is a vital “window for outsiders to look in, so that they might “see past the walls, barbed-wire fences, and the media distortions; to hear from the people in Bethlehem themselves.” Citizen journalists on the site are identified by cyber pseudonyms to protect themselves from harassment or harm, and stress that they are not affiliated with any political party or NGO. Instead, they define themselves simply as a group of concerned citizens living in Bethlehem who have come together to “show the world the effects of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and in particular, Bethlehem.” Explicitly political news reports include a discussion of Israeli democracy in crisis, settlement expansion, a report on the trial of an activist protesting against the “apartheid wall,” the Israeli Army invasion of a village near Bethlehem, and the killing of a Palestinian worker by an Israeli border guard. The site also provides a long list of links, to Bethlehem human rights, research, cultural, and peace centers, to Palestine/Israel blogs, Middle East blogs, news and information, human rights and activism, international activism, world news, and art and music.

Stranger than Fiction is a citizen journalism blog launched on February 21, 2006, written by Dana Shalash. Shalash lives in Ramallah and teaches at Birzeit University in the West Bank. Much of her blog discusses the struggle of teaching students in Palestine who have no hope of a better future. She tends to address a wide array of political issues, often from a gender perspective and from a personal and local perspective, to show how they affect people around her. Issues have included female identity in the Arab World, the Palestinian economy, the politics of the headscarf, public worker strikes, rights to education, motherhood, International Women’s Day, and the Palestinian unity government. Perhaps one of the most telling entries is one Shalash posted on January 20, 2007, which effectively pinpoints the restrictions imposed upon Palestinians’ everyday lives. The entry is entitled: “A Palestinian counting his/her blessings!” Instead of Shalash’s usual analysis of a political issue, we are presented with a simple, long, and demoralizing list of “Standing prohibitions,” “Periodic prohibitions,” and “Checkpoints

and barriers” with which all Palestinians live. Included in the 16 “Standing prohibitions” are rules such as:

- Palestinians from the Gaza Strip are forbidden from staying in the West Bank;
- Palestinians are not able to enter the area around Israeli settlements (even if their lands are inside the settlements’ built area);
- Palestinians are not allowed to enter Nablus in a vehicle;
- Palestinians cannot travel abroad via Ben-Gurion Airport;
- Gaza residents are forbidden from establishing residency in the West Bank.

(Shalash, 2007)

Shalash’s citizen journalism provides much more than information about the types of restrictions being invoked. It also conveys something about how living with them might feel—that is, how heavily they weigh upon people on the receiving end of state power. Not only are their physical movements severely curtailed, in effect turning the West Bank and Gaza into large, open prisons, but such restrictions also work to limit psychological and intellectual freedoms in profound ways. This is where citizen journalism can play a crucial role. It provides virtual spaces where Palestinians are making efforts to maintain a sense of intellectual openness, and reach out to others beyond the physical restrictions of everyday life. In the next section of this chapter, we turn to Heba Zayyan’s blog, *Contemplating from Gaza*. It is a typical example of the politically engaged form of personalized citizen journalism that has developed in the OPTs in recent years.

CONTEMPLATING FROM GAZA: A CITIZEN JOURNALISM STORY

Unlike most mainstream journalism, citizen journalism blogs are unedited and uncensored channels of communication offering Palestinians platforms from which they may express ideas and reflect on their troubled environment (see also Hofheinz, 2007). Many Palestinian bloggers, most of whom are in their 20s and 30s, see themselves as free speech and human rights activists (Dheere, 2008). As such, they believe that they have a social responsibility to openly engage with global audiences in order to tell them how ordinary Palestinians are experiencing the conflict. As Friedman (2007) notes, “A reoccurring trend seems to be stirring through the Palestinian blogs: their longing to be heard and recognized as a people, rather than objects that can afford to be misplaced.”

Beirut-based journalist and citizen journalism lecturer Jessica Dheere (2008) argues that many bloggers in Palestine and across the Arab World feel that even though others might regard them as citizen journalists, they understand that role as something quite different to the traditional journalist. As citizen journalists, they tend to see themselves as playing a “more active role in the news than simply reporting it. They are often instigators of change in the first place” (Dheere, 2008).

Citizen journalism blogs have helped to tell a truth different from the one frequently related in the mainstream media in many countries. The more globally influential ones are in English and use an array of citizen journalism approaches. As Bruns (2008, pp. 180–181) notes, some citizen journalists only obliquely discuss news and current affairs in their blogs, while others are regular reporters on their own blogs or on alternative news websites such as EI, Slashdot, and Kuro5hin (see also Allan, 2006). Beckerman (2007, p. 19) reminds us that most citizen journalists in Arab countries come from privileged backgrounds, having high levels of education, income, and leisure time in which to blog. Syrian blogger Ammar Abdulhamid does not see this as a problem, however, insisting that Arab citizen journalism often “cross[es] the bridge between the elite and the grass roots” in reporting on human rights abuses and in helping to organize public campaigns to end them (Beckerman, 2007, p. 19).

In the Palestinian context there seems to be another type of citizen journalism that regularly engages with the news, but which does so in a way that intimately connects political events to the experiences of ordinary people. Heba Zayyan’s *Contemplating from Gaza*, launched in November 2006, is an exemplar of this type of citizen journalism. It was chosen for further exploration here, as it provides one of the richest examples of independent citizen journalism in the region, by someone who has no background in journalism. (There are similar blogs, such as Laila El-Hadad’s *Raising Yousuf and Noor*, but Hadad works as a professional journalist.) She has also been an occasional contributor to *Islamonline.net*, which bills itself as an online forum for open discussion and free thinking, and a two-time guest author on the online website of the *Independent* in its “Open House” forum.

Zayyan is a university-educated, 29-year-old married woman with two young daughters, working for an international women’s organization. She makes no claim to journalistic objectivity in her writing, but instead offers independent observations as one who is living and bearing witness to everyday life in Gaza. Her citizen journalism talks about how restrictions and sanctions are affecting her life and that of those around her. She also engages with broader issues such as honor killings, reflecting upon the fact that laws made to protect women that were weak in relatively stable times have now become largely unenforceable. Other entries refer to events in the news. For example, in August 2008, she wrote a story on

the “freedom ships” that came to Gaza from Cyprus hoping to open the port to Palestinians living in the area so that they might export agricultural goods and gain control from the Israelis over imports. She had to watch this event on television, even though it was happening only a short distance from her home, for fear that the ships might be detained by the Israelis.

My blog

I am an ardent reader of Haddad’s citizen journalism blog. I found reference to it by chance reading an English magazine entitled *Palestine this Week* in October 2006. Before that, I was unaware of the blog phenomenon that was sweeping the globe. I admire Laila’s honesty and the straightforward way she presents her daily struggles as a Palestinian mother who lives between Gaza and the United States.

Citizen journalism offers an opportunity where anyone can publish on any topic that s/he thinks is significant or interesting, without censorship or editing—that is, if they are lucky enough to have the time and money to do so. I realized very early that blogging could provide me with a platform for political and personal liberation. Before I started my blog in late 2006 I felt caged, both intellectually and physically, so the chance to present my ideas and experiences felt wonderful. From the beginning its focus was socio-political, written in a way that would help shed light on how politics is affecting individual and collective life in Gaza.

I decided to write in English because I thought that it was important that the wider world should know what is happening in Gaza. It was no use writing in Arabic where I would be talking to fellow Palestinians and other Arabs about what we already know. My citizen journalism was to be about reaching the “Other.” I wanted to advance international awareness that Palestinians do not just exist as images in the news. The more I write about Palestinians, the more I will help change worldwide misconceptions and stereotypes in the media that label us as “terrorists.”

Many Palestinian citizen journalism blogs emphasize exposing how Israeli actions directly lead to human suffering, assessments of current peace negotiations, issues surrounding refugees and right of return, checkpoints, and Israeli incursions into the OPTs. I prefer to put more emphasis on people; their joys and hopes; their sadness and disappointments; and first and foremost, their daily struggle to survive. I initially thought about my blogging as an opportunity to write a Gazan people’s journal of events. My post ideas have become increasingly focused on giving people I meet a voice. Simple, everyday experiences, like a woman who told me that she was happy that she finally got her medicine; a barefooted girl from a poor family who could not afford to provide a warm coat and shoes for her, whom I met sitting in a cold hospital reception area; or a man waiting for hours to fill a gas cylinder so that he could cook his food and heat his home, all matter. I believe that I should keep my political beliefs out of my blogging to maintain its social humanitarian touch. I am determined not to fall into the trap of stimulating political and personal prejudices. This has not prevented me from talking about political events that have caused people to suffer such as various Israeli military incursions into Gaza, the denial of movement for pilgrims, and factional fighting amongst different Palestinian groups.

Being a Gaza resident and experiencing, along with everyone else, deprivations such as power cuts, scarcity of gas for transportation, cooking and heating, food shortages, and limited access to good quality health care and medicines, I feel I have a certain responsibility to explain how people suffer and yet at the same time show courage and maintain a sense of humor. What I hope a reader will find in my blog is a picture very different from media created stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

Across the Arab World, citizen journalism is making an increasingly important contribution to widening public participation. In sharp contrast with those Arab countries where mainstream journalism is state censored and journalists and their editors routinely face harassment, even jail, for criticizing the government, in the OPTs alternative forms of online citizen-based reporting are experiencing few formalized restrictions.

Palestinian citizen journalism is shifting the terms of debate on the conflict in the Middle East. In assuming the role of journalists, ordinary people are bearing witness, blogging their own stories about everyday life under conflict. These blogs offer deeply personal insights into lives lived in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and how those on the wrong end of state power endure the consequences of political decisions taken elsewhere. In attending to the everyday, in all of its heart-rending travails, blogs such as Heba Zayyan's and others like it represent important political interventions in their own right. They embody a simple hope, namely that by raising awareness of the depth and scale of suffering, pressure will be brought to bear on politicians around the world to help end it.

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