

Fighting against the Wall: Social Media use by Political Activists in a Palestinian Village

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ABSTRACT

We analyze practices of political activists in a Palestinian village located in the West Bank, who organize weekly demonstrations against Israel's settlement policy and the separation wall. Over a period of 28 months, we conducted a field study consisting of eight days 'on the ground' observation and interviewing, and extensive monitoring of Internet communication. We describe the activists' background and their efforts to organize these demonstrations under conditions of military occupation. Over time, we observe the role both digital and material factors play in the organization of protest.

Author Keywords

Social Media, field study, appropriation, political protest

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Social media like Twitter and Facebook were said to have had a significant impact on the 2010/2011 uprisings in Tunisia, after a street vendor's self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid (Wulf et al. 2013). These protests marked the starting point for the so-called "Arab Spring" that led to the overturn of the political regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. While many authors stress the crucial role of social media for these "Arab Spring" uprisings (e.g. Ghonim 2012), the actual contribution of the Web 2.0 to the developments in the different mid-east countries is debatable (e.g. Anderson 2011).

There is little doubt that new media have been extensively used for political mobilization in the Arab world, but we still do not have a convincing picture of how they are used in detail, what specific variations we might see in local use or their effects. Existing research has demonstrated very convincingly the extent to which (micro-) blogging applications were used during the "Arab Spring" (Starbird and Palen 2012; Kavanaugh et al. 2012, Al-Ani et al. 2012). Based, as they were, on sophisticated log file and content analysis of data downloaded from these media channels, these studies could not, for good reasons, provide an understanding of the detailed social, political and material context in which these applications were used. That means, and this is entirely understandable, they were able to provide only a very limited picture of what happened 'on the ground' and how political activists appropriated these media into their daily practices. We argue below that orthodox qualitative studies play a useful role in supplementing 'e-research' into political activism (Wulf et al. 2013).

In the following, we look at a political conflict which has had an impact and continues to have an impact on the Middle East geo-political environment: the tense political relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Our account entails a detailed examination of the work of political activists in a Palestinian village, and, more specifically, how internet and social media applications were appropriated in this struggle. It is necessarily partial insofar as it would be impractical to engage in empirical work on both sides of this divide.

The paper is structured as follows: after a discussion of current research, we describe the political and infrastructural framing conditions in the West Bank in order to motivate the research methods we use. Then, we present the political activists and their weekly demonstrations against the land-taking and the separation wall. Over the past three years we observed the activists when appropriating new media for their political struggle. After presenting these data we discuss our findings.

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CURRENT WORK

In recent years we have seen an increasing density of ICT usage in support of political activism and a developing interest in the CSCW and CHI communities in these topics (e.g., Al-Ani et al. 2012; Kavanaugh et al. 2012; Wulf et al. 2013; for an overview see Saeed et al. 2011). Saeed et al. (2011) investigated the role digital media played in organizing the European Social Forum and pointed out the importance of simple tools already widely used by individual activists, such as email distribution lists and WWW-sites.

Subsequently, a series of studies on social media use during the so-called “Arab Spring” were published (Lotan et al. 2011; Starbird and Palen 2012; Al-Ani et al. 2012; Kavanaugh et al. 2012). These studies describe aspects of the use of blogging and micro-blogging sites, such as Twitter, mainly during the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. While hugely valuable, these studies mainly use ‘logging’ methodologies and as such tell us less about how the use of social media interacts with users’ political activities in practice. In addressing these lacunae, Wulf et al. (2013) investigated how social media use supported political activists ‘on the ground’ in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia.

Al-Ani et al. (2012) investigated the Egyptian blogosphere during the “Arab Spring” uprisings in 2011, based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of blog postings. They identified so-called “counter-narratives” created by Egyptian bloggers to protest against the Government’s official communication and described the blogosphere as an “alternative public space” (p. 25). In another study on blog postings, Mark et al. (2012) focused on “war diaries”, published by Iraqi bloggers during the war in Iraq. Based on topic modeling and a quantitative analysis of postings, the authors investigated the relationship between war postings and other topics, esp. postings on people’s everyday life and their daily routines. Semaan and Mark (2011) examined trust building in disrupted environments, based on (mainly telephone) interviews with Iraqi civilians during the second Gulf war, focusing on (public) identity. In another study Mark and Semaan (2009) focused on collaboration structures and patterns of action during wartime, based on semi-structured telephone interviews with civilians from Iraq and Israel.

Nevertheless, to our knowledge there are very few papers which directly investigate how internet and social media are actually appropriated by political activists under dangerous conditions (such as armed conflicts, political instability, occupation, or military rule). As indicated, the above mentioned research mainly focuses on the use of new media in disrupted environments and is (quite understandably) mainly based on analysis of digital data or semi-structured (telephone) interviews. To supplement such work, we base our study on first-hand observations

and in-depth interviews in situ. In the following we present results of an investigation ‘on the ground’ of how social media is used by Palestinian activists protesting against Israeli settlement policies, and against the separation wall.

WEST BANK: POLITICAL CONTEXT AND INTERNET INFRASTRUCTURE

The West Bank is a part of the Palestinian territory which the State of Israel occupied during the Six-day War in 1967. Since then it has remained under Israeli military control. Following the 1993 Oslo Accords, parts of the West Bank are now under the administration of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Since 1967, Israeli settlements have been established in the West Bank. More than 500.000 settlers are living in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem (among 2.4 million Palestinians). The international community considers these settlements to be illegal (UN Security Council Resolution 446). Starting from 2003 during the Second Intifada, the Israeli government started building a separation wall around and within the West Bank, which it considered to be necessary as an act of self-defense against terrorist attacks. The wall is mainly built on Palestinian land, disconnects the Palestinian population and, from their point of view, contributes to the expropriation of their land (Barak-Erez 2006).

As a reaction to the building of the wall, Palestinian villages started regular demonstrations. One of these villages is Al Ma’sara, located on the southern hills of Bethlehem. It has less than 1000 inhabitants and is part of a chain of villages where some 14000 inhabitants live. So far, these villages - it is claimed - have lost some 3.500 dunum (some 865 acres) in land to Israeli settlements.

Within this chain of villages, Al Ma’sara is a major location of such demonstrations. Since 2006 it has held weekly demonstrations aimed at defending land rights and opposing the Israeli occupation. In addition, legal means have been used in defense of these rights, culminating in a recent (limited) victory in the highest Israeli court.

Divided into two areas cut off from each other, telecommunication became the main communication means for the Palestinian people living in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. Like in other countries in the Middle East, the percentage of internet users has grown strongly during the last decade (58.9 % of the population in Palestine at the end of 2011 according to Internetworldstats (2012)). In the West Bank, there is a large gap in usage between the urban and rural areas. With the increasing use of digital media, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict obviously is not just a political, partly armed, conflict anymore; it is becoming a media war (see e.g. Aouragh, 2011).

Since the beginning in the late 1990s where Palestinian people started to „tell the world their story“, some of their work led to a sophisticated „all new-media activism“ (Khoury-Machool, 2007, p. 25). Websites like Google, YouTube, Twitter or Facebook became very popular latterly. In March 2012 Facebook counted more than 900.000 Palestinian users in the West Bank (Internetworldstats, 2012). But Palestinian activists and their supporters are faced with a new generation of censorship in this field: a Facebook page called „Third Palestinian Intifada“ was removed upon request from the Israeli government, and due to a similar request Apple removed the App „Third Palestinian Intifada“ from its App Store.

Like most of the infrastructure and resources in the West Bank, air wave bandwidths are controlled and allocated by the Israeli authorities. This includes the frequency control for TV and Radio stations and mobile operators. Furthermore, access to the global network has to go through Israeli companies. The two Palestinian mobile telephone providers are still not allowed to operate 3G services. Even the installation of point-to-point radio systems needs Israeli approval which is not easy to obtain.

RESEARCH METHODS

“And it is in understanding what ... doing ethnography is, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge. This, it must immediately be said, is not a matter of methods.” (C. Geertz. The Interpretation of Cultures)

Ethnography is a contested site. It has been used for a wide variety of theoretical, analytic or descriptive purposes and presupposes no particular data collection techniques, no rules concerning time taken and no uncontested position concerning truth and objectivity. It can and sometimes does have a relationship to political or moral positioning (see e.g. Marcus 1998), such that ethnographers can be seen as ‘circumstantial activists’. Three basic principles govern our approach to the ethnographic here:

Firstly, that ethnography is characterized by analytic commitments rather than rules of method. As Geertz has put it (in interview), it [has neither] "a distinct subject matter" or a "real method" of research'. Method, in short, follows purpose. To be clear, our purposes here are not theoretical. They entail an initial analysis of the specific ways in which the digital, the ideological and the material intertwine.

Secondly, that ethnography is *inevitably* partial, incomplete and purposeful. In this respect, we follow authorities such as Geertz 1977; Marcus (ibid) as well as CHI practitioners who have adopted a similar stance (see e.g. Dourish 2006)

Thirdly, that we share a minimal commitment to seeing things from the point of view of the actor (although this

admittedly can mean a number of different things). For anthropologists, this has typically meant attempts to uncover cultural ‘rules’ (see e.g. Winch 1958; Geertz 1977) and situating the particular in the more general. Coming as a stranger has, given that commitment, necessarily meant a period of immersion. It is important to recognize, however, that such immersion is a function of analytic decisions concerning the problem space (see Randall et al 2007).

We raise these issues only to foreground the many and varied practices that constitute the ethnographic project. Our interest here does not lie in the tying of specific and local practices to more general cultural issues, but in a workable analysis of a specific series of events. We are not, put simply, doing anthropology. Our problem space is narrower. Our researchers include Arab-speakers with a better than working knowledge of background cultural issues. The very difficult circumstances of our investigations (which could be, in certain circumstances, dangerous- see Tawil-Souri 2009) meant that talking to people and observing their behavior had to be done in a cautious and occasioned manner.

These risks are even more pronounced (of course) for local actors and so building trust is a crucial issue. In May 2010 the first author visited the West Bank to explore opportunities for research and academic co-operation, specifically seeking to understand whether the concept of come_IN computer club houses which aimed to overcome ethnic and digital divides in Germany (cf. Stevens et al. 2005) could be transferred to the context of the West Bank. Following the “Arab Spring” uprisings, our research focus broadened to also include the use of social media by political activists (Wulf et al. 2013). After a personal introduction by an advisor of the Palestinian President, two researchers visited Al Ma’sara for half a day. They were received by Hasan, the head of the solidarity committee, and parts of his extended family in their house. After a presentation on the local geo-political environment, they were introduced to the village’s demonstration activities. Lengthy discussions of political and personal matters took place. In April 2011 researchers spent two days in the village. They walked around the village and conducted a variety of unstructured interviews with different activists living in the village, mainly members of Hasan’s family and other political activists. In the evening of the first days they held a two-hour workshop on how the village could benefit from computers, the internet, as well as a come_IN club house and its network. Seven local activists participated in this workshop. On the second day the weekly demonstration took place and was observed by the researchers. Informal interviews with some of the participants from the village, as well as from Israel and different European countries were conducted. Interestingly, at this point, Hasan

introduced his Facebook account to the researchers for the first time.

In May 2012 two authors visited the village one more time and stayed there overnight. Again, they conducted informal interviews with different political activists and visited the newly established computer club house. In September 2012 four authors spent another two days in the village interviewing and audio taping talks with different local and international activists. They also observed the weekly demonstrations and the usage of (social) media after the manifestations. Additionally, they conducted a workshop with children who had attended the computer club house sessions.

Some eight days were spent in the village. We interviewed 5 local activists, most of them more than once, up to twelve times, 3 inhabitants of Al Masara, 3 international activists, as well as two Israeli activists. The interviews lasted between ten minutes and more than three hours. In between the visits, the Palestinian authors stayed in regular contact with the activists via telephone and thus kept track with the developments in their lives. Due to the delicate political context we did not audiotape most of the interviews or phone calls, nor the workshop. However, we documented interviews, observations, and the workshop via photos and field notes. In the evenings of the respective days we wrote down detailed notes, all in all around 80 pages.

To achieve our objectives we also analyzed materials created by the political activists dealing with the village's struggle. Our initial analysis focused on videos accessible via YouTube and emails distributed to supporters via mailing lists. One of the authors had been a member of one of the mailing lists since his first visit to Al Ma'sara in 2010. He thus received about 80 emails, mainly reporting on the weekly demonstrations in the village. As the activists' Facebook activities increased, we analyzed - with their consent - their respective accounts. During his first visit in April 2012 one author was added as a 'friend' to the activists' Facebook accounts and thus was able to continuously follow their postings. Over the period of three months the authors observed the Facebook pin boards of Hasan (reaching back to summer 2010), the village's mayor Mahmoud (reaching back to summer 2010), and Hasan's brother Mohamad (reaching back to the beginning of 2012). We saved all their postings and selectively translated textual elements from Arabic to German (about 30 pages).

Due to the political nature of our study we had to make special efforts when triangulating narratives. The sources of our empirical investigation, as we acknowledge, are restricted to the Palestinian side of the conflict. To triangulate our data we followed five strategies: (1) we talked to the political activists about the same topics at different times and levels of detail, (2) we talked to

different actors about similar topics, (3) we matched internet-based materials with interviews and observational data, (4) we discussed our findings within the team of authors, partly composed of Palestinians, (5) and we followed the mass media coverage of the village's political struggle in Palestinian, Israeli, as well in international media. All names of the activists and their village are real ones. The authors suggested anonymising the data, but the interviewees rejected this proposal and asked the authors to use their real names.

AL MA'SARA: A FAMILY HISTORY

To analyze the village's political activities requires some historical background. Hasan's family clan is the biggest land owner in the village. With 450 members they own almost 52% of the village lands, while another family clan with some 400 members owns the rest. Mahmoud, the young mayor, belongs to the second clan. Hasan and his closer family are considered to be the most outspoken protagonists of the village's political struggle. To understand why, we give a brief account of the family's history in recent decades.

After Israel had occupied the West Bank in 1967, Hasan's parents left for Kuwait to work there. Hasan was brought up in the Gulf area and later on studied physics in India. While living in Kuwait, the family visited their West Bank village once a year for the summer holidays. The family returned to the West Bank after the first Gulf war, but there were few opportunities for a graduate in physics to work in his professional field. So he worked for a supermarket in a nearby Israeli settlement. At the beginning of the Second Intifada, Hasan felt that it was not possible for him to continue working in this position. So he decided to work on the family's farm, built two green houses, introduced ecological farming methods, and sold the products directly to customers in nearby Bethlehem.

During the Second Intifada, Hasan became a local coordinator of the Fatah movement's activities in the South Bethlehem region. One of his younger brothers, Ali, became a member of Fatah's armed forces.

In 2003, demonstrations against the separation wall started in the north of the West Bank in villages such as Budrus, Bil'in and Ni'lin. In 2006 one of the younger brothers of Hasan, Mohamad organized the first demonstration in Al Ma'sara. Activists from the northern West Bank villages supported him by informing international and Israeli activists who then came to participate in the village's struggle. Hasan decided to join him in organizing the weekly demonstrations after his brother had been beaten up by Israeli soldiers. He was arrested six times by the Israeli army, the last time in December 2011 for 30 days. *'I am getting quite used to their procedures of detainment and interrogation'*, Hasan says. Each time he was arrested he would be released

after a few weeks. Over the years he spent more than one year in Israeli prisons. The family's house was searched by the Israeli army several times, especially at night. Ali, the younger brother who had joined the military fringe of Fatah, was arrested during such a house search and is serving a 15-year-sentence in an Israeli jail on charges of terrorist activities. The opportunities to visit him in prison are very limited. Hasan told us in 2010: *'During the last five years [since his arrest], I was able to see him only once very briefly when I was imprisoned in the same Israeli jail. His youngest son was born after he was arrested. He calls his father 'Uncle Ali' like all his cousins in the village do.'*

Al Ma'sara has also benefited. The Palestinian Authority seems to specifically support villages which protest against the occupation policy by ranking them highly for donors' investments in infrastructure. During the last years, international development agencies such as US Aid or Germany's KfW have supported the building of two schools, a kindergarten, and a health station.

AL MA'SARA: ORGANIZING DEMONSTRATIONS

In pursuit of their objectives, the weekly demonstrations are the most important vehicle for activity. IT and digital media play a major role in preparing and documenting these events. First, we want to describe how these demonstrations are being organized.

The demonstrations start every Friday in the early afternoon with a march from the center of the village towards a road connecting Israeli settlements. Before the demonstration reaches the road, the Israeli army typically stops the demonstration with a chain of jeeps where soldiers armed with machine pistols block the demonstrators' march. As Hasan puts it *'They try to prevent us from reaching the road.'* At that point the demonstrators shout their messages, deliver speeches, and give interviews. However, often protesters try to access their land by attempting to breach the blockade. The Israeli forces hinder them from doing so; at that point violence can erupt. Videos of the village's weekly demonstrations can be found on YouTube. Until 2011, the videos were typically edited by foreign participants. Activists also routinely take a lot of photos which are posted on Facebook pin boards and in different Facebook groups. Photographs are also taken by Israeli soldiers with mobile phones and cameras.

Demonstrations are typically larger when they are aligned with an international event such as the International Women's or Children's day or when they refer to specific Palestinian events, such as the Nakba Day – commemorating the expulsion of the Palestinian population in 1948. For these occasions, activists mobilize more intensely. Mahmoud mentioned *'Last week we had 200 people here to recall the Day of the Prisoners [arrested in Israeli jails].'* Demonstrations in the different

villages struggling against the wall are coordinated. Members of the villages' organizational committees meet once every week to agree upon a motto for the next weekend's demonstration. Demonstrations take place in sequential order. After a demonstration in one village, the activists typically join one in another village on the south of the West Bank.

Hasan told us that demonstrations are most effective if Palestinians, Israelis and foreigners, mostly Europeans and occasionally US citizens, participate jointly. Thus the biggest effect can be reached with regard to political impact and media coverage. However, levels of engagement did vary significantly. During one demonstration the fourth author conducted informal talks in Arabic with two men from the village aged about 40 who stood aside to watch the scene. They told her why they did not participate in the weekly demonstrations: Firstly, they thought "it's all useless", and secondly they were afraid of losing their work permits in Israel. On the other side, a young female Israeli activist stated in an audio taped interview in Hasan's family home just before this September demonstration started that her motivation to regularly join the Al Ma'sara demonstrations was to raise the awareness in Israel, especially among youngsters, concerning the situation in the territories occupied by Israel. While the Palestinians and some Israeli participants are quite used to the tactics of the Israeli army, foreign visitors, Hasan says, typically disappear as soon as the soldiers start using physical violence or tear gas.

Organizing a demonstration against the Israeli wall requires a balance between insisting on marching towards the settlements on the one hand and avoiding violence on the Palestinian side on the other. Controlling demonstrations is a challenge, and stone throwing by young participants is not uncommon. In other words, there is a twofold purpose. The first one is an explicit challenge to Israeli authority and the second one an attempt to engage media support. The former objective tends to create more confrontational situations. Protesters sometimes try to circumvent the blockage of the soldiers and army jeeps. Sometimes they provoke the Israeli soldiers by climbing the engine hood of their jeeps and speak from there. Depending on the commands of Israeli officers controlling the site, soldiers then arrest activists and dissolve the demonstration. Hasan has been wounded twice and hospitalized as a result of tear gas grenades fired on him.

AL MA'SARA: A WEEKLY DEMONSTRATION

In the following we want to describe the demonstration we observed in April 2011. Some 45 min before the demonstration was supposed to start some foreign activists and their local guides were received in the traditional living room of Hasan's family home. After

some small talk and a tea served to them, four of the village's activists start to explain the geographical conditions on a local map. The presentation is held in English and is similar to that experienced by the researchers on their first visit. The activists point to the location of the different Israeli settlements and that of the separation wall. They also explain how the Israeli occupation is affecting their daily lives and mention the fact that a family member is held in prison while another brother has been killed by Israeli forces. They also point out how settlers are preventing them from using their land and destroying the villages' olive trees. The presentations are very much grounded in the activists' personal experiences. An old lady, the mother of one of the activists, later comes in and addresses the foreign visitors in Arabic, translated by the activists into English.

After taking some group photos in the living room which were later on posted to Hasan's Facebook page, a group of some 10-15 Palestinians and Europeans leave the house and start walking towards the expropriated land. On the way through the village they are joined by other villagers. Half way, a group of some 10 Israeli activists from Tel Aviv join the march. Some of these activists have been coming regularly for years to support the villagers in their demonstrations; others represent a new students' movement on the Israeli left. They tell us that also some of them were arrested by the Israeli army, but usually are released quite soon.

When arrested, Israeli authorities try to push the Israeli activists to sign a written agreement that they will not participate in any demonstration in the West Bank for some period of time. One of the Norwegian students reported that a similar request was made towards him when entering Israel.

Finally the march of some 30 Palestinian, Israeli and European activists reaches a major road leading to the settlement. Two army jeeps with some 12 soldiers stop the march at the end of that road. The soldiers create a barrier. Soon after, a third jeep with a higher officer arrives on the site. This jeep also carries an army photographer with a camera equipped with a strong telephoto lens.

The protesters stay in front of the army barrier, shouting political slogans, Hasan and one other activist give brief speeches before handing over to an experienced Israeli activist. The Israeli specifically addresses the soldiers using the Hebrew language. A Palestinian journalist and a TV team arrive on the site and interview Hasan who articulates the political message of the protesters. No acts of violence by the Israeli army are witnessed, and protesters stay in front of the barrier. After about an hour the demonstration starts to dissolve.

ROLE OF INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE VILLAGE'S STRUGGLE

The weekly demonstrations, as we have suggested, are the most important element of the village's political resistance. Al Ma'sara is a rural village with an only very slowly developing telecommunication infrastructure. However, over the course of the last two years we were able to observe a remarkable development in the use of the internet in support of its political activities.

When we visited in 2010, there was no internet connectivity in the village, as in many other rural areas of the West Bank. Even then, however, activists were aware of the importance of the new media. As Mahmoud pointed out: *"With using media we could reach a wider public and would gain international awareness for our problems. However, we have to become more professional in this field."* They pressed the Palestinian Authority (PA) to provide internet access. This may have been one of the reasons why a senior PA official had asked us to investigate opportunities to build a Computer Club in the village. At a visit to his ministry in 2010, the minister of telecommunication had suggested that rural Palestine would receive complete internet coverage within the next two years.

When we came back to the village in 2011, the Palestinian telecommunication operators had not yet provided internet access. Israeli regulations still did not allow any Palestinian mobile provider to offer 3G data services (see section 3). However, the village had organized internet provision via the 3G network of an Israeli mobile telephone provider. From a central 3G antenna and router on the village's hill top, they used Wi-Fi to distribute Internet access to four family houses and a community space in the village's health center where a laptop was available. The costs for the hardware equipment and the monthly fees to be paid to the Israeli provider were high by European standards and network speed was low. Other family houses in the village and all of the other eight neighboring Palestinian villages were not yet connected to the internet. Finally, in May 2012, just two weeks before our visit, the Palestinian landline provider brought internet access via a specifically drawn cable to the village and the computer room in its health center.

Even before the Internet was made accessible in the village, Hasan had already started to use Email and Facebook for his political activities through an Internet connection in his office. He used Email mainly to inform his wide network of supporters and journalists about the political conditions and activities in the villages, and invite supporters to upcoming demonstrations.

On the laptop in the community space he also showed us a large collection of photos and videos representing different demonstrations and protest marches that had

taken place in recent years. These materials were locally stored and not yet published on the Internet. Other photos and videos documenting their protests were still stored on his smart phone. While presenting these materials to us, he specifically pointed to critical incidents – such as villagers being beaten and arrested, him being hospitalized as a result of a tear gas grenade shot on him, or an Easter march which made it past an astonished Israeli army post and moved through a gate to the other side of the separation wall. While a year ago none of these digital materials were presented to us, the availability of a laptop screen seemed to have offered additional opportunities to ground and structure his narratives.

Hasan began to use Facebook in 2010 - the first in the villages. At the time of our visit in 2011, he presented his Facebook account to us for the first time. We could see different groups of mainly Israeli supporters. He showed us photos of them on their homepages in Facebook, some of them showing them participating in the demonstrations. Later that day we met one of the Israeli supporters who had participated in the demonstration. While browsing his Facebook account with us, Hasan occasionally sent messages to some of his Israeli supporters, reminding them to take part in the afternoon's demonstration.

Since our visit in 2011, activists have engaged with their Facebook accounts much more intensively. They post photos and texts on the village's demonstrations as well as private photos. The posted photos portray the different groups participating in the demonstrations, i.e. Palestinian activists, international supporters, Israeli activists, and soldiers. The photos tend to show conflict situations, with soldiers' weapons on display. In contrast, villagers are portrayed in a peaceful manner, often accompanied by their children.

They have progressively become more skillful in making sense of the functionalities Facebook offers such as making use of Facebook groups, sharing pictures of other activists and writing notes. Being invited to their Facebook accounts, we were able to see that Mahmoud had 271 friends, and Hasan 542, while Mohamed had the largest number of friends adding up to a total of 791. In our understanding these friends are mainly other local activists from Palestine, although they also include 'normal' acquaintances and family members. In the meantime, by 2012 there were already more persons in the Facebook group than on the mailing list.

In mid-August, 2012, we suddenly found the 'friend' function adjusted in a way that we could no longer see what kind of friends and how many of them the activists have. The reason for this change in configuration remained unclear to us. After a demonstration on July 6, 2012, Hasan uploaded several photos to his Facebook account. The demonstration was organized to remind the public of the ruling of the International Court of Justice in

Den Haag which had stated on July 9, 2004 that the construction of the wall violates international law. About one hour after the end of the above mentioned demonstration on July 6 Mahmoud posted a photo taken in the course of the demonstration and added a text written in Arabic with some general information on the local fight against the wall. This message is addressed to all activists and claims that the role of the international supporters should be *'to support the founding of a Palestinian State at the UN and to say that the Palestinian people is in the right.'*

When looking at the Facebook postings of the activists from Al Ma'sara, it is striking that their personal pages are an assemblage of materials dealing with a variety of issues such as politics, private life, music, film, and religion. Mohamad posts only in Arabic, whereas Mahmoud and Hasan post in Arabic as well as in English. Mohamad seems to be the official spokesperson for the Arabic speaking community, while Mahmoud with his rather good command of English is in charge of the announcements in English. The postings in Arabic are generally more elaborated and longer than the ones in English. This is probably due to the relatively limited command of written English compared to the activists' command of Arabic, their mother tongue.

The Facebook postings in Arabic are typically descriptive and factual, although the language used cannot be said to be neutral. They are locally targeted, and sometimes contain a direct call to the target group to actively take part or show solidarity with the Palestinians' striving for their rights, whereas English language posts tend to have a more 'ideological' flavor. An example for this difference in the use of the two languages is the announcement of the death of a Palestinian activist who had died a natural death. The English version contains the phrase *'today palestine so sad today all the world must be sad'* and appeals to a broader public. The goal of this text - and other texts written in English is to call upon the activists to feel compassion for the Palestinian cause. The character of the Arabic version is more descriptive, providing information about the death of this well-known figure, characterized as a 'hero' and 'martyr'. Also, the Arabic version does not contain a call upon the world to mourn with the Palestinian people.

Apart from their Facebook postings the activists are also members of different Facebook groups, such as "palestine al-masara" and "Al-masra press". In the description of the Facebook group "Al-masra press" they indicate (in Arabic) that *"the news agency was founded by people's media activists to report about the activities and the events dealing with people's resistance in the village"*. The goal of the news agency is to report *"in a veracious and outspoken manner"* via photos, videos and journalistic accounts of violations of rights as a result of

the occupation. This Facebook group, astonishingly, was created and is maintained by a thirteen-year-old boy who is also attending demonstrations in the village. The postings show photos and descriptions of the weekly demonstrations including preparations as well as photos and reports on community activities. They also include newspaper reports from the Internet, for example the ones published by MaanNews (www.maannews.net). This Facebook group can be seen by anyone who clicks on the “like” option. The other group, “palestine al-masara”, is a closed Facebook group which can only be accessed after having being invited by a member or the group administrator. The short description of the group translates as, “*weekly demonstration in al masara village South Bethlehem*”. The group was founded by Mahmoud in May 2012 and already consisted of 137 members only three months later. Interestingly, two months after their visit, two of the authors were added to the group without being asked. The postings include calls to participate in the weekly demonstrations. The group members also post photos taken during these demonstrations and other commented pictures supporting the Palestinians’ struggle. Additionally, this Facebook group contains some general information on Al-Ma’sara village published by Palestinian media sources and postings from “Al-masra press”. In order to reach the international public Mahmoud’s brother additionally launched a French version of this Facebook group.

There is a certain division of labor among the activists. While Mohamad and Hasan only post on their private Facebook pin boards, Mahmoud is in charge of the mailing lists and the Facebook groups. After a demonstration Mohamad would typically call the radio stations and send press releases in Arabic language to the news agencies to inform them of what happened during the demonstration. Later on, Mahmoud translates these press releases into English and distributes them via the mailing list. Occasionally, he also posts them in the Facebook group.

The photos taken during the demonstrations are typically posted on the local activists’ Facebook accounts and in their Facebook groups without seeking permission from participants. We observed one case in which a European participant felt uneasy about having his photo being published by the local activists and asked for its removal from the Facebook site, which was done.

In the following, we want to provide an example of the activists’ use of mailing lists. On a Friday afternoon in April 2011, directly after the demonstration, we received an email containing a press release in the body of the email message, describing what had happened on the scene. The press release was sent in three languages, in Arabic, English, and French. Before the demonstration started, still in the living room of Hasan’s house,

Mahmoud had asked all European participants to give him their email addresses. The English version of the text reads as follows:

"Today launched a demonstration in the village of al-Ma'sara in memory of Palestinian Prisoners Day. Where he participated in the demonstration more than 70 demonstrators, including foreign solidarity from European countries and the solidarity of Israelis. Out where demonstrators carrying Palestinian flags for access to their land which lies to the inside of the wall of annexation and expansion."

All 117 email addresses were revealed in the recipient’s field. In the evening after the demonstration Hasan additionally sent greetings to the same list of recipients attaching photos he had taken in his living room just before the demonstration started. Given the fact that participating in the demonstrations can have inconvenient consequences at the Israeli border, some of the Europeans felt unnecessarily exposed. However, Mahmoud told us that there are always some recipients who respond to his mails stating that they liked to take part in the demonstrations.

To better connect to the national and international public, the village’s activists recently launched a WordPress blog conveying photos and announcements about their activities and campaigns. The site was launched and is supported by international activists from the UK who pay the provider fees for the .com address. Later on, Mahmoud took over the maintenance of this site. At the time of writing, the site is under construction. When we visited the site there were only higher level categories to be found, such as prisoners, summer camp, woman’s center, and computer club. The site as yet contains no substantive content.

DISCUSSION

Our study describes, in a necessarily impressionistic way, the political practices of Palestinian activists in a village which struggles against the Israeli occupation and the separation wall. We focus on the way in which demonstrations are organized and the new media progressively got adopted in support of their agendas. While the availability of the internet reflects the continuing reality of a ‘digital divide’ and improves only slowly in rural Palestine, local activists have appropriated Email and Facebook to organize weekly demonstrations and maintain a social network of supporters. Our empirical data describes a growing role social media play in: (1) stimulating the participation in the weekly demonstrations under the conditions of military occupation, (2) interacting regularly with a network of Israeli supporters, (3) keeping a much looser network of international activists informed about the demonstrations, (4) offering information to the broader public. We observe a number of features associated with this. Firstly,

there is an intersection between the real and the virtual which operates in a variety of ways. Facebook and email posts serve a primarily ideological function when addressed to wider communities, but are much more likely to implicate direct calls for action when addressed to the Arab-speaking and Israeli support communities. While this is scarcely surprising, it does demonstrate a difference from other accounts of Internet mobilization such as those offered by Starbird and Palen (2012).

Secondly, and allied to this, the structure of Facebook pages indicates that there is a very particular sense here in which 'the personal is the political'. Local activists make few if any attempts to distinguish their personal and family lives from their political work. Their personal lives are deeply interwoven with their jobs in the PA administration and their political engagement. Interestingly, the appropriation of Facebook as a political platform allows them to link private life to political activities in a new manner. The personal, as it were, is newly political. Further, and as we initially pointed out, we should not discount the importance of the face-to-face nature of many political activities. Obviously a demonstration requires the physical presence of the political activists. The routines involved in preparing for the demonstration in Hasan's living room build personal relationships as much as they prepare for the activities which follow.

Thirdly, the personal is the political here in another sense, to wit that online activity may have very real- but varied-consequences for participants. There is growing awareness of the possibility of monitoring and the consequent privacy issues. We observed that the social media practices of activists were sometimes perceived as problematic by their (arguably more sophisticated) supporters. Specifically the posting of photos on Facebook pages and the usage of open mailing lists were perceived as problematic by some of the participants in the demonstration. This perception can be contributed to different levels of engagement 'on the ground'. Village activists are well known to the Israeli security apparatus and their political struggle for their land is a dominant part of their life. These experiences are utterly routine for them. By contrast, international participants display greater anxiety and are highly conscious of the consequences there might be for them, for instance, at border crossing points. An important feature of this is that online functionalities are not simply adopted but have to be learned, and so do the different implications for local activists and their supporters in the wider community.

This implicates our final point, which is that the digital divide remains a reality for many people. Accounts of the use of the new media arguably underplay situations where there are real and ongoing constraints on the possibility of their deployment. These constraints are themselves

material and political. Internet access is a challenge for political activists in rural areas of the West Bank. One needs to keep in mind that Al Ma'sara is just 10 km south of Bethlehem. The availability of the internet is restricted by a weak landline infrastructure and the Israeli refusal to grant 3 G licenses to Palestinian mobile internet providers. These conditions impact the developmental opportunities in rural Palestine. A feature of this is that access is available only to a relatively small number of people on a preferential basis (both from the PNA and external sources).

CONCLUSION

Political activism and protest activities are determined by political opportunity structures (Kitschelt 1986). When political activities are technologically supported, we might speak of technological opportunity structures, too (cf. Saeed et al., 2011). In the case of the West Bank these opportunity structures are mainly defined by the Israeli government, the PA, and Palestinian and Israeli telecommunication providers, in a complex interplay with the biographies, histories and ideological commitments of participants. The Israeli policy of not licensing Palestinian 3G providers requires the PA to invest much more money in providing internet via landlines and, for the time being, makes rural Palestine dependent on Israeli 3G providers. For the activists this option is a risky one due to a lack of any control with regard to internet availability and security.

Beyond mere access to the internet, the availability of social media combined with IT skills and creativity in appropriating those applications plays a major role in determining the effect on political actors' practices. Our point in relation to these opportunity structures is that social, political and technological structures are closely interwoven. Both ideology and material circumstance influences practice. These aspects of the opportunity structure are typically emerging bottom-up and are significantly much harder to control for authorities such as the Israeli government or the PA. In the case of Al Ma'sara, the appropriation process of IT seems to have been spurred by Israeli and European supporters who have started to document the demonstrations and posted these videos on internet platforms such as Youtube. While the local activists were initially not in control of the videos' final cut and the political messages they conveyed, they quickly recognized opportunities to make sense of social media applications in their political struggle. So the questionable legitimacy of the Israeli wall and its settlement policy not only brings external actors to the village on a weekly basis, it also opened opportunities to spur the appropriation of social media applications in support of political activities.

In order to understand how the appropriation of social media is embedded in activists' practices, we conducted

an ‘on the ground’ study which offers a rather unique access to their (political) lives and the framing conditions of the occupation. This has necessitated an approach to ethnographic work which is more ‘fractured’. Obviously, we could only observe what the activists allowed us to see and our own engagement was intermittent. It follows that a careful interpretation and analysis of observation and interview data is crucial. We tackled this potential problem by a systematic “triangulation” of our findings, comparing data from different sources, re-sampling data on the same events and activities, and cross-checking information from interviews. Even so, we acknowledge some limitations. Work in the context we describe is delicate, difficult and sometimes fraught. If, however, we are to develop approaches which enable us to understand online behavior and its relation to ‘on the ground’ behavior, it is necessary.

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