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Case 2: Palestine—New Media, Same Old Political Agenda

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The Palestinian media represent an exceptional case in the Middle East, and the Arab world in particular. Because Palestine is still under Israeli occupation, media tend to focus on macro issues such as politics, the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, and restrictions that cause suffering to Palestinians in their daily lives. Focusing on major political issues means that other issues, such as housing, food, petrol prices, education, individual freedom, and social and family violence, are less frequently covered.

This study investigates whether there are significant differences in the central issues addressed by daily newspapers and online news sites. Specifically, content was analyzed in *Al-Quds*, a widely distributed newspaper in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, and the *Ma'an* news website. It is important to mention here that Israeli policies, including control of the crossing areas, prevent the regular passage of daily newspapers between Gaza and the West Bank. This study addresses a number of questions, including:

- To what extent do media coverage priorities differ between traditional and online media in Palestine?
- What kinds of issues are both covering?
- How do the topics, frames, and sources differ between *Al-Quds* and the *Ma'an* news website?

The content analysis covers the period when the Palestinian Authority attempted to earn recognition for Palestine as a state in the United Nations (September 15 to October 15, 2011) and there was wide media mobilization of public opinion. The analysis examined the variables of topic, frame, language, and source, which reflect the priorities of coverage. The study also includes interviews with the editors of *Al-Quds* and *Ma'an*.

The Era of Electronic Media

A distinguishing quality of the newspaper as a medium is its ability to encourage the reader to think about and analyze events. In addition, the reader can read the news again at any time, and subject the text to criticism and comment. Because it is published on the day following an event, the newspaper has time to gather information, and analyze and present it in a logical sequence, enabling the reader to understand and absorb it more thoroughly (Abu Ayyash, 2008, p. 11). Nevertheless, the Internet has changed the way in which news is presented and consumed. Online news sites take several forms—electronic versions of traditional media, purely electronic news sites, and aggregator sites such as Yahoo News that collect news stories from various sources. The spread of online news has raised questions relating to the standards and formats of traditional media, the nature of a website's audience, the control of published material, the site's economic viability, and competition from other online news sites, as well as the influence of newspapers. The challenges presented by online media include the multiplicity of options such as multimedia, archives, updated news, participation features, interaction with readers, advertising and other services, and the ability to modify content in response to changing events (Nubar, 2004, p. 19). The Internet has become not only a channel to disseminate information, but a challenge to the production process of newspapers, as it includes advertising and services and a forum for interactive contact with the public. The technological revolution has given the media a greater role in influencing events (Nubar, 2004, p. 19).

What Are Online Media?

While traditional and new media have similar principles and objectives, what distinguishes new media is that they combine all the traditional means of communications in a more effective way. The Internet gives journalists the opportunity to combine text, audio, graphics, stills, and video, reducing the barrier between sender and recipient (Bunder & Al-Majaydah, 2009). Although a wide range of literature examines the characteristics of new media, most scholars have focused on three features: variety, flexibility, and interactivity (Hjarvard, 2003; Davie & Upshaw, 2006).

Journalists have long faced the problem of limited space in traditional print media, competing with advertising for space in a finite product. The Internet allows the creation of a multidimensional newspaper with a theoretically unlimited size that can satisfy many levels of interest.

Flexibility is also a key feature, enabling the user to easily access a large number of information sources and sites, and to select the information the user considers good and credible. One of the most important differences between an online newspaper and a traditional newspaper is the ability to interact directly, express views, and participate in discussion forums (Bunder & Al-Majaydah, 2009).

Online and traditional media differ in the geographical area covered. Obviously, a website can be accessed worldwide, unlike most traditional media that are restricted within geographical boundaries. *Ma'an* is available to many Palestinians who live outside the Palestinian Territories. There are also cost differences: compared with physical print distribution or broadcast radio and TV transmission, the costs of electronic distribution are low (Ahlers, 2006, p. 32).

The Palestinian Authority has placed no restrictions on Internet Service Providers (ISPs) or the opening of new web domains. By contrast, traditional media, with large capital investments in older technology and higher cost structures, are at a disadvantage. The competitive response of traditional media is to offer online versions at a substantially lower operating cost (Ahlers, 2006, p. 32). New Internet users read newspapers an average of four hours per week, whereas experienced online users spend only an average of three hours per week reading newspapers (Ahlers, 2006). These data suggest a decline in print readership and an increase in electronic readership, as users become more acclimated to the online world, but do not indicate a wholesale migration from print to the online medium (Cole, 2004).

What makes the Internet unique is that it can display information in ways similar to television, radio, and print media, but without limits of space and time. Radio and television content are both limited by available airtime, and print by the available number of lines, columns, or pages. Traditional media have tried to adapt to a new competitive environment by delivering their content online, extending services and adding new ones, and repackaging their content (Medoff & Kaye, 2011, p. 8).

News organizations worldwide are increasingly practicing convergence journalism—combining text, audio, and video in progressively interactive ways to tell stories—to engage potential audience members. However, many news websites continue to rely on written text as the dominant channel (Wise, 2009, p. 532). Media industry observers believe that the move toward convergence journalism significantly impacts how citizens consume news (American Press Institute, 2006; Nguyen, 2003, 2008). However, little research goes beyond basic audience data to explore the question of how convergence journalism affects

the way news site visitors cognitively process stories (American Press Institute, 2006; Nguyen, 2003, 2008).

Online media have also affected advertising revenues. As consumers turn to the Internet, major newspapers have declared bankruptcy, shut down, imposed staff pay cuts, or turned to Internet-only publication (Salman, 2011, p. 2).

Web versus Print Media Writing Style

Writing styles evolved in newspapers, radio, and television due to the unique nature of each medium and to the manner in which its audience consumes each medium (Johnson and Cartee, 2005). In online media, it is not always easy to identify the writing template, especially when the material includes audio, video, and images. With news reports, short stories, investigative reports, and opinion articles, it is difficult for the audience to distinguish between the various online journalistic styles. To understand the cognitive demands of reading the stories used in this study, it is important to review the history and conventions of two writing styles: the inverted pyramid and the narrative.

The inverted pyramid is a mainstay of journalistic style. Early adoption of the inverted pyramid by journalists is often attributed to the invention of the telegraph. Because of the uncertainty and expense of wiring stories, reporters were instructed to begin with the most important information (Brooks et. al., 2008). This structure works well for two reasons. First, the most important information helps to grab attention and interest, so the reader is more likely to read the entire article. Second, a story written in the inverted pyramid structure means the least important information is at the very end of the story and can be cut without any loss of important information. The alternative is the narrative style, also referred to as literary journalism, which entails presenting facts and real-life observations in the suspense-ridden manner of a novel or a short story. Narrative style is more consistent with how humans perceive and communicate information about events (Wise, 2009, p. 534).

Palestinian Media—Historical Background

Following is a timeline of key events in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (1948–2012):

- 1948: Declaration of the creation of Israel on 57 percent of historical Palestine land. The same year witnessed the war between the Arab countries and the Zionist militias, which later formed the army of Israel.

- 1967: The Six-Day War between the Arabs and Israel; as a result, Israel took control of all historic Palestinian land.
- 1987: The emergence of the first Palestinian Intifada in the occupied lands.
- 1993: Signing of the Oslo agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority in parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.
- 2000: Israel continued the construction of settlements in the West Bank in violation of the Oslo accord, leading to the emergence of the second Intifada. Israel destroyed the institutions of the Palestinian Authority and reoccupied the West Bank.
- 2012: Palestine declared as Non-Member Observer State Status in the United Nations.

Palestine is a geographical area on the coast of the Mediterranean, south of Turkey. For hundreds of years it was under Muslim rule, until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1917 during World War I. From 1921 to 1947, Palestine was under British mandate. Britain encouraged the world's Jews to immigrate to Palestine, especially after the 1917 Balfour Declaration, the promise made by British Foreign Minister Balfour to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Palestinian Jews made up five percent of the total population of Palestine until the beginning of the British mandate. With the support of Britain, the Zionist movement brought hundreds of thousands of Jews to Palestine, and built Jewish institutions that led eventually to the declaration of an Israeli state on over half of the lands of historic Palestine. As a result, approximately 750,000 Palestinians have migrated to neighboring Arab countries, losing their homes and lands (Khawaja, 2012, p. 6).

The Israeli occupation of Palestine has raised the issue of the media's role in forming Palestinian public awareness. As Jamal (2005) has noted: "Despite the limited number of readers as a result of low literacy rate in Palestinian society before 1948, several newspapers were published in Palestine. Journalists played an important role in propagating Palestinian nationalism. Political leaders and later, parties, utilized newspapers to promote their views and express their positions in different fields that concerned the contemporary social elite" (p. 72).

Israeli occupation after the 1967 war presented obstacles for the Palestinian press. Palestinian newspapers are required to seek approval from Israeli military censors for all stories, and to publish all Israeli military orders immediately and for free (Abu Ayyash, 1990, p. 74). The headquarters of *Al-Quds* in Jerusalem were closed more than once on the pretext that it published articles not cleared by the censors. Stories about

the occupation, and calls for national mobilization, have been banned. The military censor's authority even extends to the Announcement of Condolences for the Dead (obituaries). According to a prominent reporter, the Israeli censor deleted the phrase "pure soul" from the condolence the newspaper intended to publish for a Palestinian. The censor justified the deletion by asking, "How do you know that his soul is pure?" (M. Al-sheikh, personal communication, January 12, 2012).

After the Israeli occupation in 1967, a number of daily newspapers were published, including *Palestine*, *Al-Manar*, *Al-Jihad*, *Al-Difaa*, and *Al-fajer*, followed by *Al-Sha'b*, which continued to publish until 1993. *Al-Sha'b* was shut down and blocked more than once on the pretext of being funded by the Palestine Liberation Organization. During the period from 1967 to 1987, 22 newspapers were issued in Palestine, including dailies and weeklies, in addition to 20 magazines with different specialties. Ayyash concluded that these newspapers dealt with the political situation, and the circumstances resulting from the Israeli occupation, as a priority over social, cultural, and artistic issues (Abu Ayyash, 2008, p. 27). After the Palestinian Authority took control of some parts of West Bank and Gaza Strip, following the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, a number of daily newspapers emerged, including *Al-Ayyam* and *Al-Hayat Al-Jadedah*, while *Al-Quds* continued to be published in Jerusalem under Israeli military censorship.

According to public opinion polls conducted in 1993–1994, the majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip supported the Oslo agreement, "indicating that they viewed the peace process as a way out of their miserable situation" (Jamal, 2005, p. 74). The peace process reoriented newspapers to expand coverage of social, cultural, and artistic topics. The transition to a state with full sovereignty gave journalists more freedom to deal with issues such as family honor, honor crimes, women's freedom, and physical violence, along with criticism of customs and traditions.

Media Landscape in the Palestinian Territories

Several research studies have examined audience attitudes toward the various media platforms.

- Al-Quds Center for Media and Mass Communication (JMCC) carried out a survey to examine audience opinions of mass media. 76.2 percent of respondents listed television as their primary source of information, while 10 percent named radio, 6 percent the daily newspaper, and 5.4 percent online media (Al-Quds Center, 2008).

- The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics published a media survey conducted in 2000 of 8,276 households in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Only 10.9 percent of households received daily newspapers, while the percentage with access to weekly and monthly newspapers was 8.3 percent and 0.6 percent, respectively. As for the method of receiving the daily newspaper, weekly newspaper, or magazine, the survey revealed that 4.2 percent subscribe, 74.2 percent purchase, 15.6 percent borrow, and 6 percent get them free (Jamal, 2005, p. 80).
- According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, Internet usage grew rapidly from 9.2 percent of the population in 2004 to 30.4 percent in 2013. Moreover, 55 percent of Palestinian youth used the Internet, and more than one half said that they received online threats that included malware, security risks, vulnerabilities, and spam. (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

This study attempts to highlight the differences and the similarities between the Palestinian print and online media through variables that include priorities of coverage, interactivity, and writing styles.

Al-Quds Newspaper

A daily political newspaper founded in 1951 by Mahmoud Abu Alzoulf, *Al-Quds* is partly financially supported by the Palestine Liberation Organization. According to a survey by the Ramallah Center for Human Rights in 2009, *Al-Quds* is the most widely read newspaper in Palestine; 47 percent of respondents preferred *Al-Quds*, while 19 percent preferred *Al-Ayyam* and 15 percent, *Al-Hayyat al-Jadedah* (Al-Quds, 2009).

According to its publishers, about 50,000 copies of *Al-Quds* are distributed, but people familiar with Palestinian journalism question this claim, saying that distribution does not exceed 30,000 copies (Thawabteh, 2010, p. 74). Despite this discrepancy, *Al-Quds* still has the highest circulation in Palestine. Newspapers rely primarily on advertisements, which in some cases make up more than 50 percent of the content (Thawabteh, 2010, p. 74). The influential Abu Al Zolof' family owns *Al-Quds*, and researchers claim that it is managed for pure profit (Thawabteh, 2010, p. 74). *Al-Quds* is read mainly by the elderly and is distributed widely in the central West Bank in Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem, and in Jordan.

Newly established newspapers formed a challenge to *Al-Quds*. "Each daily, in its own way, has adopted a kind of mediator's role in which it attempts to explain PA [Palestinian Authority] policies to the public, and at the same time express the public's demand to the PA," notes Jamal. "This

role is reflected by the fact that *Al-Quds* has emphasized a national responsibility approach to the role of the press rather than freedom of the press driven by the economic forces of the market” (Jamal, 2005, pp. 76, 78).

Ma'an News Website.

Ma'an describes itself as an independent news agency on its website. *Ma'an* was founded in 2005, and is operated by Palestinian journalists and foreign correspondents or friends of the Palestinian people. It is self-funded through advertising and sponsorship of programs by companies and institutions.

Ma'an, with headquarters in Bethlehem, is a large media network and nongovernmental organization. It has partnerships with nine independent TV stations in the West Bank: Amal TV in Hebron, Bethlehem TV in Bethlehem, the Al-Quds Educational Television in Ramallah, Nablus TV in Nablus, Al-Farah TV in Jenin, Nour TV in Jericho, Al-Salam TV in Tulkarem, Watan TV in Ramallah and Qalqilya TV in Qalqilya (Khreisheh, 2011, p. 207). *Ma'an* describes itself as the main source of independent news from Palestine. The *Ma'an* News Agency (MNA) has become the first choice of many Palestinians, and is attracting a growing international readership and interest from international news organizations and agencies (Khreisheh, 2011, p. 207). MNA offers news reports for local, regional, and international readers, as well as feature stories, analysis, and opinion articles. Like the *Ma'an* Network, MNA maintains its editorial independence and aims to promote access to information, freedom of expression, and media pluralism (Khreisheh, 2011, p. 208).

Content Analysis

Using topic, language, source, and frame as variables, the sample analysis includes 30 stories from the front page of *Al-Quds* (1 story for each day) and 60 stories from *Ma'an* (2 daily, front-page posts, primarily 1 in the morning and 1 in the evening, depending on the timing of the information update). The content analysis covers the period when the Palestinian Authority attempted to earn recognition for Palestine as a state in the United Nations (September 15 to October 15, 2011).

Topics

The analysis shows that 79 percent of the headlines on *Ma'an* and 99 percent of the front-page headlines in *Al-Quds* were primarily political. According to Nasser Al-lahham, the editor in chief of *Ma'an*, “the

political situation in Palestine under the Israeli occupation makes political news an absolute priority.” Al-lahham says that there are many reasons for the lack of economic and social coverage: the lack of a budget earmarked for such coverage, few professional journalists in these fields, and the fact that media schools in Palestine do not focus on investigative journalism. Al-lahham also cited the secrecy of business owners, who publish whatever they want on their own websites, without any transparency (personal communication, January 18, 2012). To exacerbate the problem, the judiciary does not follow up on complaints in the economic field. One major topic not covered by mainstream media is the quality of services provided by the Palestine Cellular Communication Company (JAWAL), documented in complaints that the Aldameer Association for Human Rights received in February 2010. Complaints related to high-cost and low-quality service in the Gaza Strip (Aldameer, 2010).

As for *Al-Quds*, 99 percent of the headlines on the front page are political. Maher Al-sheikh, the editor in chief, explained that “*Al-Quds* is a conservative newspaper and avoids the excitement and suspense style, even though the newspaper considers this style in some published reports” (personal communication, January 12, 2012). Besides, the newspaper depends on advertising which increases the taboo list of topics. For example, the newspaper avoids criticizing some companies and advertisers, or the services of the Palestine Cellular Communication Company. Nonpolitical issues, such as health, education, and the environment, are not a priority for the newspaper.

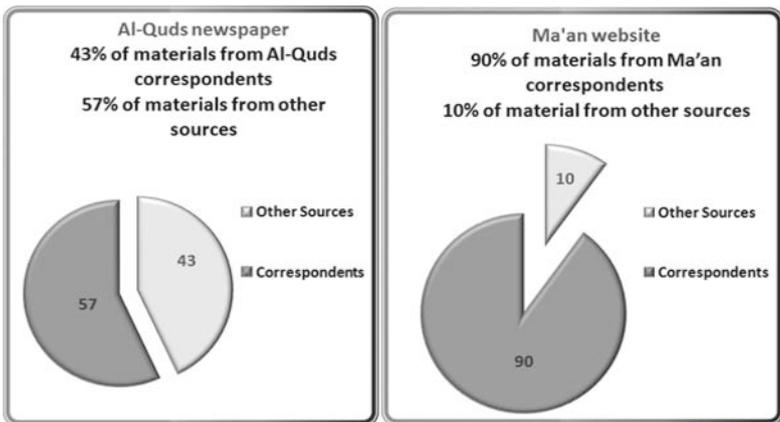


Figure 4.1 Differences Between *Ma'an* and *Al-Quds* in Sources of Stories

One of the fundamental differences between *Ma'an* and *Al-Quds* is the sources of stories. *Ma'an* is largely dependent on its own sources, while *Al-Quds* depends significantly on other sources, mainly news agencies, both local and global. According to Al-lahham, *Ma'an*'s policy is to rely on staff and correspondent sources for Palestinian news, and on international agencies for world news (personal communication, January 18, 2012).

Language and Style

The assumption of this study is that electronic media language may be less serious and sober than that of traditional print media. Daily newspapers have not adopted the tabloid format, because it may suggest a lack of seriousness. Palestinian journalists do not want to compromise the historical relationship between the form of the newspaper and the gravity of its language. The chief editor of *Al-Quds*, Al-sheikh, stated that tabloid journalism is often exciting and not suitable in the conservative Palestinian reality (personal communication, January 12, 2012).

In terms of language, two main title styles were observed—serious and direct headlines, and comic-analytical headlines. The direct headlines use formal language, while comic-analytical headlines have an analytical dimension presented in comic format. On *Ma'an* 47 percent of the main news headlines were composed of serious, direct language, while 37 percent were verbatim quotations, and only 16 percent were comic analytical. In *Al-Quds*, 77 percent of the main headlines used serious and sober language and 33 percent verbatim quotes; there was not a single headline that could be classified as a question or an analytic headline, or even far from direct language. This indicates that language in Palestinian media—whether traditional or electronic—still adheres strictly to traditional styles.

In addition, 61 percent of the content on *Ma'an* used the inverted pyramid, while 26 percent used descriptive narrative language. In *Al-Quds*, 84 percent of the stories used the inverted pyramid and 16 percent used descriptive narrative language. According to Al-sheikh, "The reason why *Al-Quds* adopts the inverted pyramid is related to the conviction of the newspaper that this is the most important template for the formulation of news. The audience asks for everything new from the media" (personal communication, January 12, 2012). It is clear that there is a correlation between newspaper content, writing style, and the predominance of political priorities in the Palestinian press. The greater the dissemination of political news, the more the inverted pyramid is used.

In terms of layout, the traditional Palestinian press, and especially *Al-Quds*, still uses only one or two pictures on the front page. The front page usually contains between 12 and 20 headlines and the most important information in the stories, with the rest on an inside page. This layout contrasts with the modern style, which features a large photo on the front page and a small number of news items, and sometimes only one news item on the page. Al-sheikh considers using a large photo on the front page—the style of the tabloid press—as inappropriate in *Al-Quds* (personal communication, January 12, 2012). Using a large photo may come at the expense of advertising space and the newspaper is not interested in losing advertisements. On *Ma'an*, the main website interface does not include more than six news stories, including the main news story, and each has at least one picture.

The large number of political headlines on the *Al-Quds* front page indicates that the newspaper still considers its readers as the elite of society. To appeal to them, Palestinian newspapers seek to preserve the seriousness of classical language in writing and publishing. Furthermore, they assume that readers want to find the most important local, regional, and international news on the first page, and will seek details on the inside pages only when interested in a specific topic.

Another assumption of this study is that electronic media will take advantage of the lack of geographical limitations. Strangely, the content analysis showed the opposite. While the traditional Palestinian press continues to highlight Palestinian news on the front page as a priority, followed by Arabic and international news, 87 percent of news published on *Ma'an's* main interface is Palestinian news. The reason may be that *Ma'an's* editors want to provide information to people living around the globe, primarily the more than five million Palestinians in the diaspora (Dane and Knoch, 2012, p. 28).

General Results

This study shows that online media in Palestine, as represented by *Ma'an*, are seeking to overcome traditional stereotypes in journalistic writing, as well as relying on excitement and suspense styles. In contrast, the printed press is still committed to sober and strict press language, and even transliteration, in addition to relying on the inverted pyramid.

The interactive nature of online media gives it the capability to respond to changing and fast-moving news. The political situation in Palestine and the rapid flow of daily news has meant that the *Al-Quds* website has become more popular. While the newspaper claims that it

prints 25,000 copies a day, about one million visitors per month go to its website. Visitors to *Ma'an* may participate in online opinion polls, making it more interactive than *Al-Quds*, which does not provide such a service.

Little attention is given to interactivity in the Palestinian press, both in print and a electronic outlets. For instance, *Ma'an* does not provide participation and comment option, although when it was available in 2011 for a short while, many visitors responded and posted comments. Al-lahham said the reason for dropping the service is the lack of staff to monitor comments. More than 7,000 reports are published daily on the website, and the estimated number of comments, when the option was available, was between 80 and 100 per report. "There are many international agencies that don't use the interactivity feature," Al-lahham said. "There's a difference between a news agency, and blogs or social network sites, regarding comments, which are not needed unless there's a certain benefit from them" (personal communication, January 18, 2012).

The Palestinian press audience is in constant decline. The three daily Palestinian newspapers (*Al-Quds*, *Al-ayyam*, and *Al-Hayat Al-Jadedah*) do not reveal their circulation figures, current or past. The editor-in-chief of *Al-Quds*, Al-sheikh, indicated that his newspaper prints 25,000 copies daily, but the number of copies sold is not clear. Al-sheikh does not consider the distribution a reflection of the newspaper's readership, because a single newspaper is read by more than one person within an organization or in the home (personal communication, January 12, 2012).

In an effort to maintain sales, the daily *Al-Ayyam* has a policy of delaying publication of the electronic version on its website until after the middle of the day. This underscores the argument of this study that the electronic media are a real threat to the future of Palestinian newspapers.

Finally, the media, out of a sense of social responsibility, focus on the political situation rather than economic, social, and cultural issues. This results in the use of serious language and writing styles. After all, most Palestinians believe that the Israeli occupation is the main factor that hinders all aspects of daily life.