



ARTICLES

# Social Media, Cyberspace, and Palestinian Digital Identity

By Dr. Ali Qleibo



Throughout Palestine, smart phones are ubiquitous. Here, there, and everywhere, Palestinian adolescents and a rising number of mature adults are seen alternately peering over their smart phones and thumbing the tiny keyboard, receiving and sending messages. Whether at traffic lights, in restaurants, cafés, family dinners, or while following television, each silhouette is engaged in keeping up with his/her own newsfeeds within their respective Internet community.

"I avoid using Facebook," my daughter Aida snaps in response to my nagging questions about her use of social media. "Instagram is better, faster, and less cumbersome." She sees my puzzled look and explains, "On Instagram, one simply takes a picture and sends it with a caption. The platform allows for brief responses that include 'likes,' 'shares' and one-line comments. Facebook is too long; too much writing, too many video clips, too many links, and too overbearing."

Social media networking exercises a radical role in shaping Palestinian society by providing media platforms in which an online/offline identity is dialectically produced at the juncture of man, machine, and culture.

"As I shower I may hum a melodious song totally out of tune, playing with the lyrics. Alone and self-absorbed under the shower, I may sing to myself unabashedly."

Cyber-reality adds another dimension to experiential reality; it does not simply mimic it. Its platforms supplement the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, they irrigate the deserts that our lives have already become. It inures us from lonely anonymity by connecting us in infinite networks of digital friendships.

Abdulrahman used the shower image to illustrate the self-indulgence that underlies the banal trivia of highly personal feelings and reflections one reads in social media platforms. "New media technologies are not merely communication tools," my friend Abdulrahman explains, "rather the structure of Facebook is set up as an alternate online reality to foster, promote, and prod individual users to make public what in offline reality would be improper public behaviour. Cyberspace provides new opportunities to reshape society and culture through providing socially acceptable venues of expression for 'hidden' identities. In this sense, computer-mediated communication platforms have become a significant Palestinian channel of cultural expression."

Cyberspace is the site in which alternative forms of online identity

and relationships are enacted, raising polemic questions about the social psychology of Internet use, the relationship between online and offline forms of life, and the rapport between "real" and "virtual."

"In this silent world, all conversation is typed. To enter it, one forsakes both body and place and becomes a thing of words alone." Abdulrahman adds, "One can read what one's neighbours are saying or have recently said, but not what either they or their physical surroundings look like. And it is precisely this "hidden" identity that enables the inane dramatization of ones sentimentality publicly online."

"I'm gonna cry, my heart is hurting for Brazil," whines Layla on Facebook during the bombing of Gaza. The level



of alienation and egoism spills over the newsfeed, absent of self-restraint. Another self-obsessed writer who often posts photos of *mansaf*, grilled fish, or stuffed aubergines announces cheerfully on the morning of Gaza's tragedy: "Good morning worldddd."

In the online identity, the majority presumes himself/herself a gifted writer: inspired, profound, aesthete, sensitive, caring, and artistic. Online everyone is a preacher, a poet, a moralist, and a politician. There are some who record their own voice as they sing off key. In fact, online identity, by the very structure of Facebook, prods such surrealistic presumptuous postures encouraged by the number of "likes," comments, and shares they yearn to score.

In Facebook the status of the user shows whether the user is married, engaged or single. There is also a feature of map share. So we learn that Sami is in the VIP lounge in Dubai on his way to Beirut, we learn that Abeer is in Beit Jala at Hosh el Yasmine Restaurant, and we see that Samira and her friends were at the American consulate reception to which they add their photos, glamorously dressed.

Further below on the newsfeed, we see that Dana has changed her profile picture with a highly stylized selfie that projects a highly sensual cover girl glitzy look. Men opt for the rugged image out in nature to project a virile image inspired no doubt by the old Marlboro ads.

One person posts his religious social reflections for the morning, a second posts on his wall the icon of St. Theresa of Perpetual Help, a third puts a verse of the Quran or a wondrous picture of some natural phenomenon, and requests the viewer put a "like" for which he/she would be rewarded by God, a fourth takes a picture of his car, a fifth uploads photographs of his voyages, of the glamorous party they were at, a critical analysis of society, of political events with links to video clips, marvels of the planet earth, surprising events, natural calamities, wonders of nature, charming animals, accidents, comic situations, status or state of mind, and words of wisdom dispensed lavishly and freely.

Offline anonymous individuals assume a charismatic and glamorous online persona: charming, erudite, caring, compassionate, involved, witty, funny, charming, self-righteous, indignant, angry, pious, and profound. Whether this online persona bears correspondence to reality is another point. Hypocrisy, double standards and falsehood abound, but this is integral to the use of cyberspace as a medium to explore and publicize private latent aspects of one's identity lurking in the offline persona. To a great extent, the use of various forms of social media becomes the platform which launches the individual into a self-absorbing journey. They provide both entertainment and a break from the drudgery of the routine and the familiar

self-image. Through "hidden identities" one experiences liminality.

Facebook is ritual: self-advertising, pandering oneself, expressing one's dreams are the dramatic elements in the rite of passage from offline persona to become "other." On MBC television, this "otherness" is succinctly expressed in a commercial in which the blue silhouette of a man is bent over his smart phone when his young daughter approaches him. At her touch, the figure assumes natural colour, life, and feelings as he embraces the child as though he has returned from a far-away voyage.

In fact, under this charade lurks a compulsive, narcissistic, exhibitionist drive. It involves extolling one's virtues (real or imaginary) and making them public. One dramatizes aspects of one's identity (real or false) to the point of making a caricature of oneself—putting them on display to be admired by his/her network of friends, followers, and fans with the desire to "go viral." Crafting posts that appeal for "likes," favourites, and reblogs becomes the means to an end; the success of each post is measured by the number of "likes" and complimentary comments. The "score" provides instant gratification. Incentives go from being motivators toward a goal to becoming the goal themselves.

Ironically, in the quest for scores, one tunes one's online image and narrative into "other" that is distant from one's offline "identity." Inadvertently, social media metrics become the reliable basis for the online persona. The identities we foster for ourselves are

The social platforms provided by social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook play a pivotal role in the conditioning and production of Palestinian contemporary digital identity. Though one belongs to the group, the social group is merely an aggregate of individuals and not a guild, a union, or a political party; cyber-reality does not impact the socio-political field of action.

reinforced by the attention they receive online furthering the rift between the offline and online persona.

"It is rare to read comments that register scorn, poke fun, ridicule, or outrage on the banal truisms, melodramatic sentimentality, and trivia or half-baked ideas that one reads on the newsfeed. The oppressive conformist pressure of Palestinian society dominates even Palestinian social media, where you mostly find 'likes' and complementary polite comments with no contradictions, opposition or negative responses," Aida explains.

Salwa's timeline constantly enriches my Facebook page with a daily stream of posts replete with commentary and



shared links. Her repertoire includes sensitive love poems, angry prose railing against the weakness and incompetence of the Palestinian Authority, hypocrisy of social conventions, and the laconic apathy of the silent majority. In her online persona, she is alternately outraged, needy, melancholic, boastful, and sentimental, and is consequently rewarded with responses. Through being flattened she has become more easily amplified. Every now and then, Salwa regales us with photos in which she is the epitome of beauty, opprobrium, and class of course in the right company.

Narcissism, exhibitionism, fear of loneliness, and anonymity underlie the compulsive addiction to the most popular Palestinian platforms for social interaction: Facebook. The newsfeed perpetuates the drive to broadcast ourselves, posting photographs and externalizing our inner life by providing a system rewarding the production of one's image that is public—albeit at the expense of sacrificing the sanctity of our inner lives.

My friend Khalil points out: “The online persona enables the Arabs (and Palestinians in particular) an alibi wherein private, idiosyncratic, political, and social precepts find public expression—albeit in cryptic messages, and gut reactions in the form of comments and shared links. Social media, though used mostly as a pastime mode of entertainment, makes it possible to break the foils of socio-political censorship and self-imposed taboos in a public discourse.”

Khalil adds, “Digital friendships are compatible with the Palestinian concept of offline friendship: casual, free of expectations, pressure, and demands, and in this sense it fosters a negative sociological trend whereby reciprocal family obligations dominate social relations.”

Social platforms sweep individuals in nets of virtual relationships at the expense of the complexity of connecting with multifaceted persons for whom we care. Internet social relations inure us from experiential reality to substitute it with a virtual, flattened cyber-reality and an illusory network of digital friendships.

Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter—the new digital world in which we reveal ourselves prods exhibitionism. We want to show off and promote ourselves. To build our identity, the digital reality serves as our platform. Networks know where we are, documenting each and every movement, thought, and feeling. We live under inspection, surveillance, and conformity. In the process, we are all becoming information. Hyper-visibility is the new experience. Yet the more we reveal, the more we lose our solitariness.

“Visibility is a trap.” Foucault warned of this conundrum in his major opus, *Discipline and Punish*. In fact, social media represents the embodiment of the nightmare of idealizing the social in which individual liberty is forsaken.

Heaven and hell: by idealizing virtual reality, the digital revolution has created a cult of the social. We are no longer on our own. Everything is socialized. Social media platforms eliminate solitude. Yet we need solitude; to be alone and to discourse with oneself is central to the human condition.

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