



# Would Social Media Bring Freedom to Palestine?

Saleem Alhabash, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Public Relations and Social Media  
Michigan State University



I am a social scientist who is enthusiastic about the social media phenomenon and how it affects our lives. I use lab and field experiments to test what motivates people to share, like, and comment on social media posts and how engagement with social media can lead to offline behaviours. Applying my research to my homeland, I argue that interaction on social media related to the Palestine question could potentially lead to changes in attitudes and behaviours toward Palestine and the Palestinians.

## Social Media: A Global Village?

In the mid-1960s, Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan<sup>1</sup> talked about technology as a force unifying the world into a *global village*, where people communicate freely and things that happen in one part of the world are seen or heard in another. However, the fact that people are on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram does not make them connected

Over the past decade, social media have experienced exponential global growth. Facebook has 1.28 billion users, each with an average of 338 Facebook friends.<sup>7-8</sup> There are 255 million active Twitter users, who send 500 million tweets per day.<sup>9</sup> More than a billion Internet users visit YouTube each month, where they watch six billion hours of video monthly, and upload 100 hours of video every single minute.<sup>10</sup> Palestinians have the opportunity to leverage social media in order to engage people in online interaction that will lead to empathy and support for ending the Occupation.

and does not remove physical and mental borders among nations. Social media are still very segregated. We interact with people who are like us, despite the possibility of having diverse online networks. It becomes difficult, then, to infiltrate people's networks with content that is incongruent with their values and norms. Even when it happens, the chances of them engaging with such content are slim. Taking into consideration negative stereotypes of Palestinians, pro-Palestinian social media content is deemed incongruent, thus leading us to a case of "preaching to the choir," instead of changing how others perceive us as a nation and as a cause.

How do we move from "preaching to the choir" to communication with a wider audience that leads to more understanding, empathy, and behaviours in concert with our plight

for self-determination and an end to the Israeli occupation? It will not be easy. To master this art, we need to understand how people use social media and the resulting effects. But first, we need to understand human nature.

## Return to Basics

As humans, we respond to everything in our environment in one of two basic ways: we either approach stimuli or we avoid stimuli. Our central nervous system is guided by the appetitive motivational system, which drives us to seek out pleasurable stimuli such as food and sex, and the aversive motivational system that drives us to avoid negative stimuli, such as danger so that we run away from a roaring lion. Understanding this trait of human nature is essential to realizing why people click on a link, hit the "like"



button, share a post, or comment on something someone else has said on social media. When communicating with others, the key is making it relevant enough to activate their approach motivation, which guides both online and offline behaviours. A study in 2012<sup>2</sup> found that positive articles in the *New York Times* were shared more often than negative ones. My own research showed that college students were more willing to like, comment, and share anti-cyberbullying posts if they had a positive rather than a negative tone.<sup>3</sup> This is precisely why images of babies and kittens get more likes, shares, and Retweets. Pleasant images activate pleasant emotions, and people like to share pleasant things. I'm not suggesting we start posting pictures of cats to garner support for Palestine, yet knowing about this dynamic is essential to getting people more engaged online.

In 2007, I conducted a month-long experiment, where I asked Palestinian and American young adults to interact on Facebook. In addition to discussing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, participants asked each other about dating norms, food, school, and family relationships. Pretty mundane, right? Yet after one month of such "mundane" interactions, both the Palestinian group and the American group had changed their perceptions about the other for the better. Bottom line: the experiment was a success. Participants were able to humanize the other side, which resulted in viewing them favourably. In another

study, American college students played the roles of the Palestinian President or the Israeli Prime Minister in *PeaceMaker*, a video-game simulation of the conflict. Results from two studies showed that playing the role of the Palestinian President for only 20 minutes led to positive changes in attitudes and stereotypes toward Palestinians.

A sceptic might very well say that these interactions are meaningless, considering the complexity of the conflict. That might be true in some cases, yet additional studies I've conducted show that expressing intentions to "like," share, and comment on a Facebook status update (regardless of the topic) nearly doubles the chances that a person would express intentions to engage in relevant offline behaviours.<sup>4, 5</sup> How do we, then, get people engaged online with our cause?

### Creating a "Dragonfly Effect"

In their book, *The Dragonfly Effect*,<sup>6</sup> Aaker and Smith argue that to create successful social media campaigns, you need to identify a clear goal, figure out how to grab people's attention, engage them with the content, and invite them to take action. I often see posts on my Facebook newsfeed related to Palestine that have no clear goal. We need to think more strategically about what kind of impact we want to have with the information we share about Palestine. We need to provide content

that not only grabs people's attention, but also engages them. To engage people and motivate them to take action, we need to tell a story, to put a human face on our just cause, to generate empathy (bloody and gory pictures don't generate empathy; they create anger and push people away). Above all we must remain authentic. We need to provide a call to action beyond sheer awareness-raising. It's not about telling people what to do; it's about offering mechanisms for them to act upon their online engagement.

To answer the question I posed in the title of this article, I can only say: *it depends*. Social media offer amazing opportunities to share our perspectives without the restrictions of mainstream media gatekeepers. We have access to a virtual space where anyone can talk

to everyone, where everyone can fulfil his/her responsibility to champion our rights and induce change, even if it's just one person at a time. This is the time when one person could make a difference. The world awaits our call to action!

*Saleem Alhabash is an assistant professor of public relations and social media at Michigan State University's Department of Advertising + Public Relations and Department of Media and Information. He completed his B.A. in Journalism and Political Science from Birzeit University, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism. Away from research, he enjoys baking batches of baklava and muttabaq—consistently crowd-pleasers—to share with friends and colleagues.*

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.livinginternet.com/i/ii\\_mcluhan.htm](http://www.livinginternet.com/i/ii_mcluhan.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Berger, J. & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? *Journal of Marketing*, 49(2), 192-205.

<sup>3</sup> Alhabash, S., McAlister, A., Hagerstrom, A., Quilliam, E. T., Rifon, N., & Richards, J. (2013). Between "Likes" and "Shares": Effects of emotional appeal and virality of anti-cyberbullying messages on Facebook. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 16(3). DOI: 10.1089/cyber.2012.0265

<sup>4</sup> Alhabash, S., McAlister, A. R., Richards, J. I., Quilliam, E. T., & Lou, C. (In Press). Alcohol's getting a bit more social: When alcohol marketing messages on Facebook motivate young adults to imbibe. *Mass Communication & Society*.

<sup>5</sup> Alhabash, S., Baek, J.-h., Cunningham, C., & Hagerstrom, A. (2014). Anti-cyberbullying civic participation: Effects of virality, arousal level, and commenting behavior for YouTube videos on civic behavioral intentions. Paper presented to the *Communication and Technology Division of the annual meeting of the International Communication Association*, Seattle, WA.

<sup>6</sup> Aaker, J. & Smith, A. (2010). *The dragonfly effect: Quick, effective, and powerful ways to use social media to drive social change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>7</sup> <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/03/6-new-facts-about-facebook/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://about.twitter.com/company>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>

