

Social Media in the Gaza Conflict
Will Ward
Presentation Notes

I. Intro/ Definitions

This talk is partially based on my article on social media in the Gaza conflict but Najm has asked me to branch out and talk about news media interaction with social media and the prospects going forward so I will do my best to cover those in the time I have. Start with basic definition:

social media refers to trends in Internet development that emphasize collaboration, information sharing, and linkages among users.

These include: Blogging, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, and Facebook (which I will especially focus on today)

I aim to:

A. lay out Danah Boyd's characteristics of social media, and think about how they work particularly in Facebook

B. Talk about social media in the Gaza conflict, (not just Facebook but full spectrum) and my observations on that.

C. look to recent developments and way they may be leading. And compare and contrast Boyd's stages of social media adoption in Arab world

II. Key characteristics of Social Media in general

According to Danah Boyd, Various sites come and go but these 5 properties will stay” Persistence, Replicability, Searchability (ambient information), Scalability, (de)Locatability

What makes Facebook important is the network effects are different than with blogs

- blogs, youtube are about publishing, pushing content out to the world
- facebook and twitter are more about sharing with your existing social network and forming building groups around shared interests
- Facebook cute kitten effect -- unlike blogs, you can't shut down individual users without shutting down the whole site.
- extends weak ties

- lower barriers to group formation, but also requires no commitment

III. Social Media in Gaza Conflict

What happened?

- Info dissemination via blogs – older Convergence with old media, e.g. Sameh Akram Habeeb, an employee of the Ramattan News Agency
- Network-based political messaging – its not what you say but who you say it to. “status donation” appeals by pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian groups
- “social media rapid response teams”
- YouTube Channels started by IDF to broadcast video of airstrikes
- Al Jazeera making Gaza footage available via Creative Commons licensing – a move designed to encourage material to be spread via social media

Dynamics/ problems

- “rise of citizen propagandists” Josh Foust described this happening in the Georgia war with Russia, but it’s equally applicable to the Gaza conflict.
- Info dissemination via blogs more powerful because of “media blackout” *scalability*
- Governments jumping onboard; hard to tell government messaging from organized groups from individuals. Govs also not as quick to respond and can be flatfooted
- Ongoing experimentation – there is now a dynamic where innovative use of social media can drive a flurry of traditional media coverage – and governments and pressure groups seem keen to harness this.

IV. Trends/ future prospects: conflict vs. other uses

Danah Boyd’s Stages of social media adoption:

1. Early networkers
2. large scale youth adoption – which provokes a moral panic among adults about what they are doing online

3. widespread adult uptake

How are we seeing these playing out in the Arab world, particularly Egypt?

- We are somewhere between stage 2 and stage 3. Two books (*The Reality of Facebook: Friend or Foe?* and *Facebook Nation*) show how many are worried about the dangers of Facebook/ loss of privacy (does the CIA read my Facebook pages?) but are also beginning to come to terms with it as a social phenomenon and value some features
- In Egypt there is also a “political panic” as the government attempts to shut down opposition movements, e.g April 6 on Facebook
- Regional Differences – The recent announcement of full Arabization of Facebook will further lower barriers to entry and could have a big impact in places like Saudi Arabia where English is less widely taught.
- Facebook and other social sites are not necessarily used to break the rules, challenge governments, etc. More important use is reinforcing existing social norms.
- Despite all this (relatively still few internet users, low ability to impact politics, and the tendency to reinforce norms rather than upset them) the rising uptake of Facebook is still significant. Like the introduction of social scientific polling in the 20th century America (see Sarah Igo) the ability to form groups, see other members, and count their strength could possibly be leading to a more self-aware public culture. I think this in itself is significant and should be understood on its own terms.

Articles and resources mentioned:

<http://www.danah.org/papers/talks/MSRTechFest2009.html>

<http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=701>

http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/citizen_propagandists.php

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/IGOAME.html>