



The War on Gaza:

How Social Media Constructed Narratives and Solidarity among Gazans



7amleh- the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media

**The War on Gaza: How Social Media Constructed Narratives
and Solidarity among Gazans**

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the genocidal war in Gaza in October 2023, social media platforms have not merely served as an extension of Palestinian social life, but also as a prerequisite for survival. With the nearly total destruction of infrastructure and recurrent electricity and communication outages, the digital space has become a survival tool and a platform for documentation and expression in the absence of international media coverage.

This position paper aims to examine how the war on Gaza has altered the utilization of social media platforms among Gazans, and why this shift has introduced further meaningful and functional layers. It does not provide a purely technical or psychological analysis but rather seeks to understand how Palestinians construct their digital narrative during wartime, and how their language, priorities, and self-representation evolve in a constrained and vulnerable digital context.

The paper focuses on analyzing the "Gazan" digital discourse through five analytical dimensions derived from individual interviews and focus groups with young men and women from the Gaza Strip. Additionally, a qualitative analysis of dozens of posts gathered from various social media platforms, particularly Facebook, was conducted using the Web Scraping technique. The five dimensions identified were: resorting to survival and documentation tools, emotional exhaustion of resilience narratives, misunderstanding and social censorship, degradation of the national discourse, fragility of international solidarity, and the transformation of content from expression to survival.

It is argued that the "so-called social" digital space in times of genocide has not only reflected reality but has also become part of its conditions and its constructive tools. Considering this transformation, social media platforms have become a space for redefining politics, identity, and survival—not as flamboyant expressive practices, but as daily actions that resist cleansing.

The position paper concludes with policy recommendations based on the data presented, aimed at enhancing digital justice, protecting Palestinians' freedom of expression, and expanding digital survival tools during emergencies.

Internet and Social Media in the Gaza Strip- a Statistical Overview

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 83%¹ of Gazans (aged 10 and above) utilized the Internet in 2022, and the rate of families owning an internet connection reached 92%², reflecting thus a satisfactory functioning of the digital infrastructure despite its vulnerability. Despite the lack of precise statistics about social media users in Gaza in particular, general Palestinian data indicate that around 2.2 million people-equivalent to 40.5% of the population³ -engage with social media platforms, with Facebook⁴ being the most dominant, constituting more than 96% of digital use.

However, these indicators, and despite their increase, do not reflect an independent or equitable digital infrastructure, but rather conceal a complex reality resulting from the Israeli occupation's control over the frequency spectrum and the infrastructure, with technical limitations that compel Gaza to operate only through the 2G network, incompatible with the type and nature of modern applications.

At the beginning of the genocidal war in October 2023, this infrastructure gravely deteriorated: 50% of the communication network were entirely destroyed, and 25% were partially damaged⁵. According to Paltel's estimations, the rate of the network outage reached 80%⁶, while internet traffic witnessed a decline exceeding 85% in the first week of the war. The overall losses in the information and communication field are estimated to be 18.5 billion dollars in all sectors.

To overcome this collapse, residents resorted to alternative and risky solutions, like using Israeli and Egyptian cellular SIM cards and establishing local WiMax

1. PCBS & the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology: The World Telecommunication and Information Society Day, February 7, 2023, <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4510>

2. Ibid.

3. Digital 2024: Palestine, Simon Kemp, DataReportal, 23 Feb 2025, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-palestine>

4. Social Media Stats in Palestinian Territory - April 2025, StatCounter, <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/palestinian-territory>

5. 7amleh Issues New Report on the Impact of War on Gaza's Telecommunications Infrastructure, 7amleh – The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, 10 Jan 2025, <https://7amleh.org/post/impact-of-war-on-gaza-s-telecommunications-infrastructure-en>

6. Communication and internet outage in the Gaza strip is on its eighth day, 19 January 2024, <https://www.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/88411>

networks⁷. These are communication networks providing long-distance wireless data transmission through different means, ranging between point-to-point connections to mobile connections. Despite the limitations of these alternatives, they were deployed as means for digital resilience amidst coercive isolation. Considering this, digital infrastructure was not used to meet ordinary civil needs but was rather reconstructed during the war as a desperate space for survival, and a hidden battlefield within the context of an ongoing struggle for the right to visibility, outreach and expression, and for digital rights in general.

Implications and Shifts in the Use of Social Media Platforms during the Genocidal War against Gaza

Methodology:

This position paper is based on a qualitative, descriptive approach for analyzing the discourse transformations in the use of social media platforms in the Gaza Strip in the war that started in October 2023. The position paper relies on three major data sources:

- In-depth individual interviews, with written documentation, held with Palestinian participants, categorized into two categories: The first group from the Gaza Strip, consisting of those who stayed in their residences during the war or were internally displaced within Gaza; the second group includes Palestinians from outside Gaza, including the diaspora, or the occupied territories: the West Bank and the Palestinian citizens of Israel. The sample included digital activists and ordinary users of social media platforms. The questions were sent digitally, the answers were received in writing.
- A focus group meeting on WhatsApp with 10 male and female participants, born in 2000 and later; it was held in a written form and planned over a period of two weeks due to the inability to hold a face-to-face meeting or video calls. The participants' interaction was analyzed as collective narrative content reflecting the emotional sensitivity and the prevailing discourse in the context of the current reality.⁸

7. Gaza's telecommunications: Occupied and destroyed, Ali AbdelWahab, Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, 30 Jan 2025, <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/gazas-telecommunications-occupied-and-destroyed/>

8. The participants were selected based on Purposive Sampling, taking into consideration geographical diversity, and targeting regular social media users, who experienced communication outage or took part in digital discussions about war or resilience or about losing confidence in digital contents. The purpose was not providing statistical representation of the population but rather using a wider spectrum of the digital discourse in irregular circumstances. The methodology used also considers gender distribution and different social categorization to guarantee diversity of voices within the limited sample.

- Analysis of digital content using Web Scraping: A special code was developed in Python, using open-source libraries, like Selenium and BeautifulSoup to collect more than 80 public posts related to daily life contexts, such as survival, political expression and emotional interaction since October 2023 and until the end of 2024.

Personal data was not collected, and individual identities were not revealed; all analyzed content was made publicly available, and manual sorting was done later to use the posts that best represented the narrative and social transformations.

This paper adheres to research ethics and acknowledges the limitations of representations and the challenge of access, especially in a space subjected to surveillance by the occupying forces and recurrent communication outages. The methodology used does not claim to encompass the psychological or social contexts but seeks to present an analytical approach sensitive to the discourse transformations imposed on the digital space in Gaza by the conditions of war and genocide.

1. The Current Situation in Gaza: the Impact of the Ongoing Blockade and the War on Daily Life, and the Role of Social Media in Bridging Gaps Resulting from the Blockade

Data from interviews and focus groups demonstrate that the change in the use of social media platforms during the genocidal war was less a conscious choice than an urgent response to the breakdown of the official infrastructure. Most participants noted that the electricity and communication outages rendered digital platforms- despite their vulnerability- the only means for communicating with the external world. Amid dozens of posts analyzed during the first week of the war, recurrent patterns of content emerged, showing that the use of digital platforms no longer reflects reality, but rather has become a condition for survival. Posts like "I am alive" and "help us rescue the injured" were frequent, and these were not posts that seek interaction, but calls for immediate help. One tenth of the participants confirmed connecting their phones to emergency services, humanitarian aid and news channels. Personal accounts have become alternative liaison centers, coordinating rescue and communication efforts, amid the collapse of the official institutions.

On the other hand, a new digital discourse emerged, varying between documentation and recognition of the probability of death, as some posts included expressions like "this is my will" or "publish this if I get killed". This shows that the digital space

has not become merely a space for expression, but much "beyond expression"; as if the post is a person's legacy after his death.

Reflections from the focus groups demonstrate that some participants feel their posts are not being seen or understood: "we speak out, but they do not feel our suffering", as stated by one participant. This feeling of "disconnection while connected" reflects a complicated crisis: the need for a communication tool, versus the feeling that no one is listening. This tension has created what might be called "digital alienation"⁹ where social media platforms become mirrors reflecting exclusion instead of existence and visibility.

To conclude, a review of the posts demonstrates that the content is no longer random but rather based on what could be called "urgent needs", as some posts asked for money, water, electricity, fuel or even safe refuge. Certain posts were directly service-oriented in nature, confirming that digital platforms have become, during the war, an alternative infrastructure for civil use, amid the failure of the official emergency system. Considering this, social media platforms cannot be considered merely as digital platforms, but as means for documenting life- not for the purpose of gaining interaction, but to guarantee that the dead and the survivors are not forgotten.

2. Digital exhaustion resulting from resilience narratives and mythologization of suffering

The interviews with the activists and focus group participants highlight an increased feeling of digital exhaustion resulting from the continuous external and internal expectations of portraying the Gazan Palestinian as an eternal "steadfast hero". This exhaustion is not associated only with recurrent publication or documentation of death, but also with "the fatigue of always being a symbol of resilience and steadfastness", as indicated by one participant. All this started with powerful and patriotic posts, filled with slogans, but gradually evolved into whispering, and sometimes complete silence.

More than half of the participants indicated that they frequently feel that what is expected from them is not the real narrative, but a version "valid for solidarity": a version that is stable, never angry and never contradictory. An analysis of dozens

9. American Studies Encounters the Middle East. Edited by Alex Lubin & Marwan M. Kraidy. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Chapter by Helga Tawil-Souri, "Technology's Borders: The United States, Palestine, and Egypt's Digital Connections," p. 282.

of reveals a clear transformation in the language structure: from a collective discourse of "we will stand firm" to individual expressions such as "I am tired" or "I am scared".

This transformation is not superficial but reflects an internal exhaustion emerging from the undeclared obligation that Palestinian Gazans should always represent heroism. Even dark humor, which had previously served as a resistance tool, has been reproached for "lack of seriousness" or "disrespect of blood". One participant indicated that she stopped sharing for some days after being attacked by followers due to a "desperate" expressive post.

What strikes most is that this pressure does not come only from supporters or international audience, but from within the Palestinian context itself, which is used to re-produce the typical narrative of heroism, a narrative which many youths do not dare to object to. One participant says: "You do not dare say that you are falling apart, not because you are not patriotic enough, but because you feel it is a taboo".

Visually, documentation features have changed too. During the first month of the war, the images that prevailed were ones of rescue efforts and acts of bravery; but what followed were silent images: children with distant looks in their eyes, empty streets, mothers who neither cry nor scream, but only stare. This visual transformation supports what could be described as "the breakdown of the heroic image and the emergence of the exhausted human".

Digital exhaustion here is an existential burden accompanying the act of expression under the lens of a network that monitors and observes, a society that expects you to play a certain role, a world that does not respond unless "served a visually complicated suffering plate". Considering this, the act of expression itself becomes exhausting, demanding continuous self-censorship: "Is what I am writing relevant? Would it be comprehensible? Would it be interpreted as weakness or betrayal of the narrative?"

In brief, this phase reveals an internal deconstruction of the symbolic structure of the Palestinian digital discourse: from a narrative portraying Palestinians as supernatural creatures, to sincere, individual and exhausted expressions that do not seek to construct a "myth" but to flee its consequences.

3. From Calls for Resilience into Calls for Rescue: Reformulation of Discourse and Needs

The escalation of the war was accompanied by a significant change in the nature of the digital content published by Palestinians in Gaza. While the expression "the night has started" in previous wars or at the beginning of this genocidal war, was a collective symbol of fear and unity, it has now become a faint echo amid the daily survival calls. Posts have ceased to be an expression of a collective symbolic moment and have become calls seeking help or asking for blankets, flour or refuge. Documentation has ceased to be a path to history, but rather a proof of existence, and the descriptive analysis of the digital posts observes that the discourse has taken a service-driven direction, based on the material need rather than expression.

This transformation was not spontaneous but resulted from the gradual erosion of the socioeconomic structure. In this context, the unboxing phenomenon gained a symbolic layer transcending pure consumption: it was about affirming life, sharing an accumulative narrative and an urge to show off. But with the ongoing genocide, it has turned into a harsher version: opening humanitarian aid boxes that do not contain needs, but leftovers.

Alongside this transformation, crowdfunding emerged as a new assistive mechanism, concealing within it ethical and emotional issues. The posts and interviews analysis showed that access to aid became conditioned by the "attractiveness of the story", or the person's ability to represent his pain in a way that evokes collective empathy, thus transmitting a strong feeling of injustice. One participant said: "Some people got thousands, because their post is sad and touching... but others do not have the ability to speak loudly, so they did not get anything". Considering this, existence has become conditioned with expression: "speaking up", "number of followers" and "image quality".

This shift in the expressive content, from collective resilience to individual survival, and from slogans to needs, does not reflect merely a shift in the discourse, but also in the social structure that redefined daily life as an endless state of emergency. Amid this reality, social media platforms have become laden with the desire of survival: those who succeed in telling their stories receive aid, and those who remain silent, disappear.

4. Misunderstanding Palestinian Gazans when Expressing Anger and Political Participation

Social media platforms during the war against Gaza were not only a space for expression but have become a symbolic arena in which political and ethical borders are re-designed for the collective. The individual interviews and focus groups pointed out that expressing anger or political critique was not discussed or understood but instead met with "symbolic overt violence", taking the form of collective shaming and defamation. Whoever writes a post incompatible with the narrative has his name transmitted to the popular outrage machine: where he is labelled, tagged and judged.

One participant says: "I criticized a certain faction, and before I could even respond to the comments, they started insulting me and accusing me of being part of unit 8200!". Similar testimonies referred to collective attacks they were subject to because of publications expressing disillusionment or deception. An analysis of dozens of posts shows that some posts containing critical opinions or expressions of political suffering were met with accusation of betrayal, weakness or "demotivation". Yet, this shattering of solidarity cannot be separated from the deep transformations in the political identity among the young generation in Gaza, the Post 2007 generation, who grew up in a political void restrained by the blockade and the division. This generation has not seen struggle as a concrete act, but a ready-made digital narrative. Considering this, the political voice of this generation does not emerge from field experience, but from questions raised about this experience and from the opposition to its discourse. The insult, the black joke, the unideologized anger are all means for saying that: "this reality does not represent me".

In this context, the "tent" becomes a new symbol for rebellion, and not merely a temporary residence. One participant says: "people write about endurance, and there comes the response: "How lucky you are, do you have a bidet in your tent? ". One does not seek to devalue resistance, but to unveil the disconnection between the official narratives and the daily suffering that is not being articulated at the organizational and political levels. One participant said: "I feel I am under surveillance, not only by the intelligence services, but also by my friends... you should think carefully before posting anything". Aimd this fear, many youths left the digital space, or resorted to restricted account, or simply stopped expressing their opinion, as probably this silence no longer represents indifference, but rather survival.

These dynamics suggest that the digital space during genocide is not merely a space for self-expression, but also a realm for re-constructing a passive social contract, not based on sharing, but rather on symbolic cleansing. This results in a fragmentation deeper than the image reflected in violent reactions or public insults: the disintegration of trust, of the right to criticize and of the notion of community. For what will be left of the "political collective" if it becomes an observed group constantly under surveillance, where diversity becomes a menace, opinion a reason for punishment and criticism evidence of discord? Then, this platform changes from a resistance arena into one that recycles violence and reconstructs a new colonialism with internal tools.

5. International Solidarity, from Ephemerality to Absence

During the early days of the Genocidal war against Gaza, it seemed that international digital solidarity reached its highest levels: Gaza-Under-Attack trended on major digital platforms, as videos documenting the massacres went viral and were shared millions of times, while celebrities and influencers joined the support campaign. However, within a very short period, all this lost momentum, and gestures of solidarity appeared as temporary emotional storms, devoid of any constant political or ethical vision. The interviews pointed out recurrent deception, as indicated by one participant: "In the first week, I felt that our voice is heard, a week later, they returned to their breakfast posts". In the focus groups, one participant said: "Solidarity has become like a Story, it disappears after 24 hours". Moreover, the posts analysis showed that many digital campaigns that gained a large-scale interaction did not last for more than a few days, and in some cases, they became a shareable visual content that is more than a tool for exerting pressure. A remarkable example of this was "All Eyes on Rafah" campaign that went viral on Instagram in May 2024 and seemed then a symbolic turning point. However, it remained bound to the visual space, leaving no concrete political effect. While writing this paper, and after the Israeli forces' full invasion of Rafah, turning it into a buffer zone separating Gaza from Egypt, we have not witnessed any similar digital interaction. No new attention has been directed to this crisis, no digital banners were raised, and no stories were told in absence of image. Such a strategic event passed unnoticed, without leaving a real digital effect.

This form of conditioned solidarity, that does not appear unless "visual fascination" is available, re-constructs the Palestinian as a "visible body" rather than a political cause. With the passage of time, many participants started to ask explicit questions: "Do we write to be heard, or to be consumed? Does external solidarity serve as a supportive tool, or is it merely for conscience relief? Amid this collapse, the mobilization at the University of Columbia and other American universities is an exceptional step. For the first time since the beginning of the war, an organized academic solidarity emerged, challenging the authorities, and redefining the support of Palestine, deeming it an extension to the struggle against colonialism, racism and genocide.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that social media platforms are not only tools for portraying Palestinian suffering, but have also become a space for symbolic struggle, negotiating legitimacy and defining who is visible and who is marginalized. The war against Gaza redefined the relationship between the "Gazan" and his screen: from a tool of documentation to a space of survival, mirroring deception. In the absence of infrastructure, international justice and political responsiveness, nothing has been left for the Palestinian but this fragile space- where he can scream, claim and remain.

However, this space is not neutral, for it practices censorship, reconstructs authority and helps judge different opinions, not only on behalf of the occupation, but also on behalf of the Collective itself. Considering this, revisiting the role of social media platforms during genocide time, cannot be limited to developing expressive tools, but should also include questioning the way we practice politics, build narratives and construct a new "us" that neither marginalizes nor judges; one that does not content with screaming, but writes to be heard and to remain.

Considering this, adopting the recommendations suggested in this paper cannot be deemed a technical or organizational luxury, but a political and ethical necessity to expropriate this space, and formulate a Palestinian narrative on its own premises, not dictated by algorithmic conditions or current circumstances.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Enhancing community archiving of digital content from Gaza and supporting local initiatives that document digital expression and individual narratives during wartime, while respecting the participants' privacy and rights.
2. Providing protection for activists and users through training on digital security and providing tools for dealing with auto-censorship and social digital attacks.
3. Raising awareness about the influence of coercive digital discourse and encouraging critical community dialogue about the forms of exclusion within the Palestinian digital space, like accusation of betrayal and defamation, and opening doors to diverse and non-stereotypical expressions.
4. Supporting alternative and unframed narratives and allowing the youth to use social media platforms to formulate their own ways of expression, non-adherent to the conventional frameworks of heroism or seeking sympathy.



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