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The July 2006 War and the Lebanese Blogosphere: Towards an Alternative Media Tool in Covering Wars

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On 12 July 2006 Israel launched a war on Lebanon that lasted 33 days. The war resulted in more than one thousand Lebanese killed, 30% of them children under the age of 12, severely damaged Lebanese infrastructure and displaced more than a million Lebanese.

It was one of the most reported wars since the first Iraq war in 1991. Regional and international media outlets had their reporters on both sides of the Lebanon-Israel border. The Lebanese media and pan-Arab satellite news channels like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya were bringing the war live into every Lebanese and Arab household around the globe.

However, something else emerged as an essential alternative media platform, the Lebanese blogosphere. As Sune Haugbolle put it, in his article on the Lebanese bloggers published in 2007 in *Arab Media and Society*, for people outside Lebanon the 'blogosphere soon became an indispensable addition to the daily dose of international and Lebanese media'.

Blogs became the medium of choice for many 'who wanted to follow and understand the conflict' (ibid.). However, the messages that were sent via the internet from Lebanon had helped fulfil another purpose. They played a pivotal role in countering the messages the Israeli PR machine disseminated on the purpose, objectives and 'accurate execution' of their military operation code named 'Operation Appropriate Retribution' and later changed to 'Operation Change of Direction'.

According to an article in the Israeli daily *Jerusalem Post* on 30 July 2006, the images of the second 'Qana massacre' that featured the killing of at least 52 innocent civilians by Israeli air strike caused a PR disaster for Israel that needed to be addressed (Hoffman, 2006). Indeed, the international community started pushing for a halt in hostilities only one day later, on 31 July 2006.

'Seige Notes', 'Beirut Journal' and dozens of others were blogs that helped spread the images and the reality of the 'Qana massacre' and other atrocities that took place during the 33 days of war. Such blogs made some commentators term the war 'the most blogged about war in history' (Ward, 2007).

Rasha Salti, the Lebanese curator and freelance writer, whose English-language 'Siege Notes' were circulated widely and wildly, believes that 'the Israeli PR campaign was perhaps countered for the first time (in the case of their wars with Lebanon) with a new type of communication, the voices of everyday people, or the bloggers (whether full-time or part-time, novices or professional)' (Salti 2009).

However, Salti believes that the Israeli military campaign was a PR disaster not because of the bloggers—which in her opinion 'seems like a far-fetched contention'—but because the military campaign failed. Nevertheless, she regards her 'Siege Notes' as 'the political response of a citizen against the Israeli aggression' (ibid.).

The Lebanese bloggers were communicating their political and civil response to a massive war launched on their land targeting their fellow citizens to the rest of the world. They conveyed that through 'the personal voice, the lived experience to [sic] the size of the individual, the non-mediated, non-formatted testimony' (Salti 2009). It was important to know that whatever account one was reading, it was not backed by a 'mammoth machine', editors and their censorship, and is not packaged in 'sound-bites'. It was this non-mediated and non-formatted testimony that the international mainstream media reproduced later, making the blogosphere not just a platform for the bloggers to pose their voices, but a highly demanded alternative news source.

This was also what Hanady Salman, editor at the Lebanese Arabic daily *Assafir*, tried to do through her e-mails that found their way into a special blog called 'Beirut Journal', a blog set to accommodate her daily English messages from Beirut. Salman knew that the worst images of the war would not reach many outside the Arab world.

Salman's first message was sent after a truck of civilians fleeing their village was targeted by Israeli planes. She remembers: 'they were a dozen of women and children and a couple of men who left their village (Marwahin) after the Israelis had warned them to leave. They went to a UN base that refused to receive them so they were on their way back when the planes hit them and the two surviving kids told us the planes were hunting them. I sent the message to colleagues in Western media because I knew the pictures and the story were not going to reach them otherwise. I know it from previous wars' (Salman 2009).

Salman was aware that either the pictures would be labelled graphic and not be shown or the whole story would be considered controversial and thus either avoided or distorted. To her, those were civilians murdered in broad daylight. Thus, she sent the pictures and the message to western journalists on her mailing list and asked them to spread the word if they could. At this point Salman says she was acting out of her civil and journalistic responsibility. She believed that spreading the word was the only way to prevent similar atrocities from happening again. The word was spread widely and both Salman's and Salti's notes were republished by several blogs and news websites in the United States, Canada and Europe (such as Middle East Report, London Review of Books, Tomdispatches.com, Indymedia.org, wordpress.com, worldproutassembly.org, informationclearinghouse.info and *Asia Times* online), and were translated into German, Italian and Turkish. Their messages appeared in several mainstream publications in the 'West' (such as *The Herald Tribune*, the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*) and they were both interviewed by American and European networks and newspapers (one of those was CBS News). Some of Salman's letters were later recorded and appeared on YouTube accompanied by images of Israeli assault victims. In 2008 PM Press produced a documentary titled: *The War of 33: Letters from Beirut* featuring Salman's letters.

Salman, unlike Salti, was targeting mostly, 'western "informed" journalists' whom she was aware 'view the events in our part of the world in a way that is very much influenced by the intensive Israeli PR campaigns'. However, she explains that she was not aiming at 'proving who's right or wrong' or to 'launch an anti-Israeli, pro- Arab kind of campaign'. She merely wanted to tell the 'story', report what was happening, and let 'each one on the list decides what to think'. While Salti does not agree on labelling her 'daily chronicles' as part of the 'citizen journalist' phenomenon, Salman does identify her role as a journalist as complementing hers as a citizen. However, both felt that they needed to continue doing it because they felt 'useful'. The interaction with their virtual readers and the feedback they received made them feel they had to keep the flow of the messages going.

Both Salmans and Salti's messages reached audiences beyond their expectations. Salti, for instance, says that she suddenly became aware that she was no longer writing for an 'exclusive society of intimate friends' or addressing 'a group of people close to my heart and trusted' (2009). However, she tried to keep the guise 'for as long as it made sense to'. It was a device for her, as she says, to overcome 'her shyness' and to not take herself or her writing 'too seriously'. She kept her chronicles personal and informal, but rich with information and factual updates, which complemented Salman's daily account from Beirut.

Western readers and journalists turned not to be the only readers the bloggers from Lebanon were able to reach. The Israeli readers were among those who received the Lebanese bloggers' messages (sometimes through third parties). Salti was approached by an Israeli TV journalist who told her that she will include passages of her 'Siege Notes' in her TV program. She also received reactions from intellectuals and artists from the extreme left in Israel who wanted her 'to keep writing and were actively disseminating the messages around Israel' (Salti 2009). Thus, the effect of the un-solicited, un-censored, un-formatted messages also reached the Israeli society.

The Lebanese bloggers' experience during the July 2006 war has proven that the internet could play an essential role in reporting wars through the eyes of the people it affects. It has also proven that it can reach audiences and readers beyond the scope of traditional and mainstream media. The Lebanese blogosphere during the July 2006 war provided evidence towards a transnational alternative media tool. A tool—on reflection today, almost three years after the end of the war—that the Lebanese bloggers have not been able to take further and figure out how to effectively use in times of peace.

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