

# **Creative Activism: Youth Media in Palestine**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the extent to which participatory media function as tools for youth expression, empowerment, activism, and advocacy in Palestine. I argue that, first, youth media provide opportunities for creative expression and civic engagement in spaces in which youth participation is often marginalized. Secondly, youth media offer alternative information sources to potentially challenge dominant discourses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict generally and the roles of Palestinian youth specifically. However, youth media practitioners, especially those from outside the community, often face the challenge of preserving the very youth agency that they aim to promote. It is thus necessary to be aware of the power dynamics implicit in such projects, even when adopting a pluralist approach.

I begin by identifying the diverse approaches to youth media emerging in Palestine, and then examine the influence of youth media at the individual, community, regional, and international levels. I then discuss some of the limitations of youth media initiatives, and emphasize the importance of local ownership and youth participation. The findings are based on fieldwork conducted in the West Bank from 2006 to 2008, including interviews, surveys, program evaluations, and participant-observation.

**Keywords:** Youth, media, arts, activism, participation, youth media, participatory media, media activism, refugees, Palestine

## **Introduction**

In 2004, youth at the Lajee Center in Aida Refugee Camp in the West Bank worked with local volunteers to write, illustrate, and publish “The Boy and the Wall,” a children’s story in which a boy imagines ways to resist the separation barrier, an eight-meter concrete wall being constructed in his neighborhood (and throughout the West Bank) to separate Palestinians and Israelis. The boy’s ideas include rising above the wall as a tall mosque, flying over the wall as a kite,

and using *dabka*, a traditional dance, to shake the earth to knock down the wall. Children at the center worked together to develop and illustrate the story; and the published book, printed in both Arabic and English, has been distributed locally and internationally. I was introduced to the book in 2006, during my first visit to the Lajee Center, and I have since used it as a teaching tool in American classrooms to introduce students to issues faced by Palestinian youth, as described in their own words and images. “The Boy and the Wall” project is just one example of how youth media can create new avenues for youth expression locally, offer alternative narratives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict globally, and inspire new spaces for exploring culture, community, and conflict.

This paper examines the extent to which participatory media function as tools for youth expression, empowerment, activism, and advocacy in Palestine. I argue that youth media provide spaces for youth empowerment at the individual level and civic engagement at the community level, and offer alternative narratives to challenge dominant discourses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict regionally and internationally. However, participatory media are not removed from the power dynamics inherent in traditional modes of representation. Thus, youth media practitioners face the challenge of negotiating a space for youth expression that does not undercut the individual agency they aim to promote.

I begin by exploring the concept of “youth media” and identifying diverse approaches to youth media emerging in Palestine. I then examine the influence of youth media at the individual, community, regional, and international levels, focusing on the process of youth media production at the individual and

community levels, and the influence of youth media representations at the regional and international levels. I then discuss some of the limitations of such initiatives, emphasizing the importance of local ownership and youth participation in project design and implementation.<sup>1</sup>

### **What is Participatory Media?**

Drawing from Bleiker and Kay (2007), media representations can be categorized loosely as naturalist, humanist, or pluralist. Naturalist approaches view media representations as objective and neutral, while humanist approaches aim to elicit compassion in viewers, using media as catalysts for change. However, humanist approaches often have the (unintended) consequence of evoking pity rather than compassion, and portraying people in conflict situations as passive victims (Bleiker and Kay 2007; Moeller 1999), particularly when images are conceived through universalist lenses that overshadow unique contexts and individuality (Gregory 2006; McLagan 2006).

In contrast, pluralist approaches involve individuals documenting their stories through their own media representations. According to Bleiker and Kay, these pluralist, or participatory, approaches “validate multiple local knowledges and practices, thereby disrupting existing hierarchies” often imposed by mainstream western media (2007: 151). Participatory media thus enables individuals to take an active role in social meaning construction (Debrix 2003: ix; Bleiker and Kay 2007: 151), allowing for a wider range of voices to be heard, and

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<sup>1</sup> I employ a grounded theory approach, drawing from extensive field research in the West Bank, and relying on mixed methods including interviews with youth media trainers and participants, youth surveys, program evaluations, and participant-observation at trainings, exhibits, and screenings. The paper also draws from the social movement, popular education, and community media literatures.

contributing to more nuanced understandings of conflict situations (Gregory 2006).

The term “participatory media” thus refers to alternative media in which individuals and communities share personal stories and collective experiences, often with the goal of raising awareness about a specific issue or challenging dominant discourses in the mainstream media. As Dagrón outlines, participatory media differ from other communication strategies in several ways:

- Participatory media are *horizontal* rather than vertical, involving people as dynamic actors who control processes of communication and social change, rather than as passive recipients of information and instructions.
- Community-based media focus on processes of dialogue and *participation* over top-down campaigns that fail to build local capacities.
- Participatory media recognize that communication, development, and change are *long-term* processes rather than short-term solutions.
- Participatory media involve communities in *collective* efforts instead of including just a few individuals.
- External trainers work *with* local communities in researching, designing, and disseminating projects, rather than working for them.
- Participatory media are *specific* to each community, rather than imposing a standard framework in diverse settings.
- Community-based media are *people-driven*, reflecting real issues identified by participants.

- Participatory media projects are *owned by the participants* to ensure equal opportunities for community access.
- Participatory media projects are essentially about *raising consciousness* about real problems and possible solutions (Dagron 2001).

Youth media, as the term implies, involve amplifying young people's voices on issues of importance to them. Youth media are creative on the one hand, in that the processes of production challenge youth to express their ideas and experiences in unique ways; and activist on the other hand, in that their representations can enhance dialogue and initiate action on different issues.

### **Why Youth Media in Palestine?**

Participatory media, and youth media in particular, are important tools in Palestine for several reasons. First, participatory media are useful in conflict areas for reflecting how the conflict is being experienced at personal and local levels, in contrast to most mainstream coverage.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the majority of mass media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (and other conflicts) primarily focuses on incidents of violence, and top-level developments and decisions. While these emphases are understandable from a mass media perspective, it is important to provide accounts of how individuals and communities at the grassroots level are experiencing conflicts daily.

Second, alternative media are important in conflicts with asymmetric power dynamics, such as Israel-Palestine, in which media coverage is often

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<sup>2</sup> As Gregory writes, "most mainstream media coverage... focuses on short news stories, often reliant on stark visual imagery and guided by the voice of a newsperson intermediary," in contrast to in-depth, contextualized stories reflecting local voices (2006: 197).

framed through the lens of the more powerful party. As d'Estree notes, "When power differentials are so extreme and entrenched that they are literally not noticed, the accompanying oppression typically involves removing the voice and perspective of the oppressed" (2005:109). In these cases, participatory media offer alternative points of view from the dominant discourses, providing different frameworks for analysis.

Third, youth media representations are especially valuable in the case of Palestine for amplifying the voices of young people, who are often portrayed in the mass media solely as victims or perpetrators of violence. Youth media facilitate the emergence of a different image and understanding of Palestinian youth by enabling them to share their stories in proactive and creative ways. In addition, the *process* of youth media can restore a sense of agency and help them address trauma or depression, which is common among Palestinian youth.<sup>3</sup>

### **Youth Media in Palestine**

Youth media are emerging in various forms throughout the West Bank.<sup>4</sup> In this section, I briefly describe some of the initiatives taking place to provide specific examples of the phenomenon of youth media in Palestine.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Theatre*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to a 2009 UNDP report, over 80 percent of Palestinian youth suffer from depression.

<sup>4</sup> This paper focuses primarily on projects within the West Bank, though participatory media projects have also been conducted in Gaza, Israel, and Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon.

<sup>5</sup> This is by no means an exhaustive or complete list; rather, I aim to give a general sense of the broad scope of Palestinian youth media projects.

<sup>6</sup> Although theatre is considered more of an art than a form of media, I include it because its function and implementation is similar to youth media. Indeed, community theatre can be seen as a sort of predecessor to present youth media projects, in that it reflects the same philosophies and processes as participatory media, but does not require the equipment and technology necessary for media production. Thus, despite

The Ashtar Theatre was founded in Jerusalem in 1991, and opened a theatre in Ramallah in 1995. Ashtar coordinates a Forum Theatre program, which aims to raise issues of oppression that are often taboo in Palestine, and challenge both oppressors and victims to engage in action and dialogue to find new solutions to these problems.<sup>7</sup> The plays are written, directed, and performed by young people, and confront local issues such as child labor, forced marriages, and honor killings, as well as various aspects of the occupation. Other youth theatre initiatives include Freedom Theatre in Jenin Refugee Camp, and Al-Rowwad, the Palestinian Children's Theater Center, in Aida Refugee Camp.

Likewise, Freedom Theatre uses the creative process as a "model for social change," providing youth "with a safe space in which they are free to express themselves, and in which they can develop the skills, self-knowledge and confidence which would empower them to challenge present realities and to reach out beyond the limits of their own community" (Freedom Theatre 2007).

Freedom Theatre developed from a drama project initiated during the first intifada by Arna Mer Khemis to help address children's traumas and fears resulting from

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its relative immobility, community theatre is one of the most affordable and accessible forms of alternative storytelling, and often incorporated into youth film and video projects.

<sup>7</sup> Forum Theatre represents one dimension of the "Theatre of the Oppressed" framework developed by Augusto Boal in Brazil in 1971. Now present in over fifty countries, the Theatre of the Oppressed uses participatory theatre to help people think creatively about active change, with the ultimate objective of furthering essential human rights. There are different approaches to Theatre of the Oppressed, but most involve analysis and dialogue by both the actors and the audience on real-world situations of oppression. In Forum Theatre for example, actors present a scene or play reflecting a situation of oppression, then invite audience members ("spect-actors") to replace the protagonist in the scenes and improvise different responses and solutions to the situation. The other actors improvise responses in turn, and then the situation and proposed solution are discussed to explore the reality of using different options in real life. In this way, Forum Theatre is a "collective rehearsal for reality" (Boal 2004) yet its dramatic context gives participants the freedom to explore difficult issues openly.

the violence of the intifada and the occupation. Today, Freedom Theatre enables youth to have a voice on the occupation and other issues through theatre productions, and to express themselves through film, music, multi-media, storytelling, and circus performance workshops.

In another example, Al-Rowwad, the Palestinian Children's Theatre Center in Aida Refugee Camp in Bethlehem, was started in 1998 by Abdelfattah Abu Srour to enable youth to use theatre for expression and to resistance. Abdelfattah worked with youth at the center to develop the play "We Are the Children of the Camp," which started with youth improvisations about their lives in Aida, and grew to include reflections on Palestinian history, politics, and culture from the early twentieth century to today. The play has been produced internationally and in Palestine, including a 2005 tour in the United States. Al-Rowwad also offers workshops in art/drawing, photography, film/video, and writing, and provides job training, healthcare, and supportive education for youth in the camp.

### *Photography*

As new technologies make cameras more affordable, easier to handle, and competitive in terms of quality, youth photography projects have emerged throughout Palestine. In these projects, including Picture Balata in Balata refugee camp in Nablus, and photography workshops at the Al-Rowwad Center and Lajee Center in Aida refugee camp, youth typically receive basic training in film or digital photography, then photograph different aspects of their lives,



discuss their photos, write descriptions and captions, and organize exhibits and screenings in their communities and abroad. At the Lajee Center, one photography project focused on producing images that reflect specific rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>8</sup> while other projects explored dreams and nightmares, and daily life in the camp.

In contrast to theatre, photographs are easily exportable as prints, in books and calendars, and perhaps most commonly, on project websites. In addition, with the exception of captions, the image-based nature of photography overcomes language barriers, allowing for quick visual communication.

### *Film and Video*

Like photography, the increasing accessibility of digital video has sparked an interest in youth film, video, and digital storytelling workshops. The NGO Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy (MEND) has worked with youth in cities across the West Bank producing short films on issues ranging from education to water shortages, while human rights groups like B'tselem have provided video cameras in numerous villages for residents to document human rights abuses and attacks by extremist settlers. In addition, joint Palestinian and international groups like Voices Beyond Walls have worked with youth in multiple refugee camps (including Aida, Shu'fat, Qalandiya, Al-Amari, Balata, and Jenin camps) to produce short videos based on youths' stories from their lives and communities.

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<sup>8</sup> In another rights-based photography initiative, students at Birzeit's Right To Education developed an exhibit and book illustrating the challenges they face in pursuing an education in occupied Palestine, such as checkpoints, arrests, and harassment, as well as other themes including isolation, poverty, and resistance.

Despite the clear need for proper subtitles or translation, digital video is easy to export and share via DVDs or online, allowing for widespread distribution.

Participatory video, photography, and theatre are just some of the approaches to youth media being employed in Palestine today. Other media include youth publications, television dramas and news programs, radio shows, oral histories, visual arts, music, blogs, and websites.

### **Individual Agency and Community Empowerment**

Youth media initiatives have the potential to create change at different levels. In this section, I first investigate how youth media projects contribute to the development of individual agency and empowerment through processes of self-expression and identity exploration. Next, I examine how participatory media initiatives create and (re)define community spaces by exploring collective identities, enhancing social cohesion, and facilitating community conversations, events, and forums. I argue that the process of participatory media enables youth, both individually and collectively, to have more active voices in their local communities, and more proactive roles in wider sociopolitical movements.

#### *Individual Empowerment*

At the basic level, media training provides youth with both technical and artistic skills that can open vocational opportunities. Youth develop technological skills such as how to use cameras, operate different software, and design websites, and many youth seek out further experience with arts, media, or technology recreationally or academically. For example, after participating in one

youth photography project in Bethlehem, several participants planned to study photography in college, while others hoped to be hired as freelance photographers at weddings and community events. In these ways, participatory media projects can make youth aware of potential vocational tracks, and provide them with skill sets that are valuable in conflict zones like Palestine in which unemployment is notably high.<sup>9</sup>

Youth media projects also provide youth with artistic skills, such as how to compose strong photographs, use color and sound effectively, and create moving stories. For example, Yahia, a teenager from the village of Battir said that photography helped him appreciate and capture the “beautiful art in agriculture,” prompting him to organize photography trainings for younger children in the village, focusing on documenting the terraced hills and farmland around the village.

Moreover, participation in youth media projects fosters a sense of creative expression that may be both empowering and therapeutic. In terms of empowerment, youth media projects encourage youth to think creatively and draw on their own insights, thus giving more attention to individual expression. For example, Bidaa', a boy from Qalandia, rarely spoke in large group settings, but he immediately felt comfortable when using the camera, which he used to create a photo-story about his father's arrest.

Media and arts projects can offer youth an outlet to explore and express emotions that they might not have previously addressed, thus giving them a way

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<sup>9</sup> The 2009 CIA World Factbook estimates the unemployment rate to be 18.6 percent in the West Bank and 34.8 percent in Gaza.

to cope with traumas resulting from various incidents of violence and suffering as a result of the occupation. In Bethlehem, which was heavily targeted by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) during the second intifada, one mother commented that her son had been distant and withdrawn since a recent raid, but was re-engaging with his family and friends through the process of taking photographs and writing about his community's experiences. In another example, in Shu'fat Camp near Bethlehem, youth honored the passing of the renowned Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish by creating a short film with photographs and a recording of their voices reading one of Darwish's poems, allowing for a collective expression of grief and honor.

Youth media projects can also be individually and collectively transformative by incorporating critical analysis skills that challenge youth to think differently about themselves and their environment. By encouraging participants to examine the values and choices that characterize themselves and their communities, participatory projects inherently emphasize "critical thinking, interrogating one's own assumptions, exercising social imagination and creative problem solving" (Adams and Goldbard 2002). Participants become better equipped to confront those problems and engage in meaningful action for social change. By identifying and articulating difficult issues through participatory media, participants can better realize the problems that need to be addressed, the actions that need to be taken, and their role within that action.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This process derives from Paulo Freire's (1993) concept of "conscientization," in which individuals employ "critical consciousness" to reach new levels of awareness, enabling them to act effectively for change.

In the case of Palestine, most youth are certainly “conscious” of the occupation from an early age, but they may not have critically examined how they have experienced the conflict personally, or perhaps more importantly, what role they might have in challenging the occupation and taking action for change. This is not to imply that Palestinian youth do not consider these ideas without youth media projects, nor does it imply that youth media projects always have this effect. Rather, I argue that youth media projects facilitate and encourage this sort of critical reflection. For example, “The Boy and the Wall” project mentioned above used a creative project to help kids brainstorm ways that they could resist the separation wall. While some of the scenes in the book are clearly imaginary, other ideas envisioned by the central character have been used in resistance activities, such as flying kites over the wall, providing onions to protesters subjected to tear gas, and using traditional dance as a symbol of struggle. In another example from the Lajee Center, youth who had spent time in prison developed a play (that they also filmed), which they performed with other youth in the camp to help them prepare for the experience of arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment. While the project started as a creative exercise, it imparted valuable knowledge, with one boy commenting that participating in the drama helped him avoid being tricked into a false confession when he was later arrested.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, youth media not only provides opportunities for reflection and action, but for amplifying one’s voice. According to d’Estree, voice includes

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<sup>11</sup> For scenes from the play, see *From Camp to Prison*, a documentary film in production by Nidal Al-Azraq and Amahl Bishara.

the “ability to tell one’s story, to narrate one’s own version of meaning to personal or collective experience” (2005: 105), and is closely linked with notions of self-worth and identity. Participatory media can thus give youth a sense of legitimacy and authenticity by providing a space to “restore voice and create a safe framework for the naming of truths” (d’Estree 2005: 110). The process of “naming truths” can also enhance media literacy skills, by helping youth think more critically about how mainstream sources often depict them and their situation. For example, Mike, a boy in Bethlehem, stated that while he wanted his photos to challenge the common image of Palestinians as aggressors or terrorists, he also wanted to challenge the image of Palestinians as solely suffering victims, which he felt was often portrayed by international organizations using the “humanist” approach. By thinking deliberately about what kinds of stories they want to tell, and what kinds of images they want to create, youth naturally think more critically about other media that seek to speak for them or about them.

### *Community Engagement*

While becoming more aware of one’s agency is empowering at the individual level, participatory media projects also aim to help youth identify their roles in the context of their communities. As Ganz (2007) explains, sharing personal narratives, or “stories of self,” allows for the development of “stories of us” within a community, finally leading to a “story of now,” or plan of action based on personal experiences and community values. Likewise, Bleiker and Kay note

that participatory projects can “open up spaces for communities to work through the problems that confront them” (2007: 151). In other words, because participatory media projects are based on creative expression, they encourage honest and open communication between members of a community, and especially enhance dialogue between youth and adults. Sharing youth media projects through exhibits, screenings, performances, and other venues creates public spaces for discussing issues affecting the community and developing possible courses of action for meaningful change.

In Palestine for example, Ashtar’s Forum Theatre productions create spaces for community members to discuss ways to confront the occupation, as well as internal issues such as early marriage and domestic abuse. Likewise, an exhibit of youth photos of the land around Battir contributed youth voices to community discussions on impending land confiscations from the separation barrier. In another example, a screening of a youth film from Qalandiya camp about a gas station explosion created a healing space to reflect on an issue that affected many families in the community. As Bleiker and Kay summarize, “the exhibition is part of a larger, ongoing effort to change the way people think about themselves and their surroundings” (2007: 158).

Essentially, participatory media enhance youth understandings of their own strengths and capabilities, as well as their communities’, thus deepening their sense of individual and collective agency. The creative process enables youth to become more critically aware of the issues affecting them, express their ideas and opinions, and inspire dialogue and action.

## **Regional Dialogue and International Activism**

Images, films, performances, and other youth media representations can function as tools for activism and advocacy at the regional and international levels. At these levels, participatory media communicate stories across borders that raise awareness about local issues and often inspire action. In the case of Palestine, youth media projects reflect different aspects of the conflict than often portrayed in the mainstream media, communicated through the lived realities of youth participants. The youths' stories ground the broader conflict in the lives of individuals and communities rather than abstract institutions, thus creating a new narrative of how the conflict is actually experienced by those living within it, particularly youth. These emerging narratives challenge dominant discourses in the mainstream media regarding the dynamics of the conflict, and also challenge common perceptions of Palestinian youth. As at the community level, the sharing of youth media through screenings, exhibits, publications, and performances at the regional and international levels creates new spaces, both actual and virtual, for further engagement and action.

### *Regional Dialogue*

The use of participatory media in conflict situations can challenge misconceptions about the "other," and also perceptions of the conflict itself. In many protracted conflicts, "othering" is adopted by each side to distance themselves from the other group, increase their own solidarity, and justify actions and attitudes towards the other. Government officials, movement leaders,



schools, popular culture, and mainstream media of both sides often create, propagate, and reinforce stereotypes of the opposite party. As d'Estree notes, "both sides are frozen in their own narratives: kept from expressing nuances within by members of their own community and kept from a nuanced understanding of the experience of the other side" (2005: 109; Green and d'Estree, 2002). However, participatory media, and youth media in particular, challenge these perceptions by presenting different images of both the other and one's self.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of Israel-Palestine, both Israeli and Palestinian institutions and individuals often propagate inaccurate portrayals of the other. Many Israelis I spoke with associated Palestinians with violence and terrorism, and they assumed that the majority of Palestinians support the destruction of Israel. Though this view is not grounded in reality, the perceptions have been engrained through many dimensions of society. Youth media projects have started to challenge some of those notions by showing regular people in their daily lives, thus challenging the trope of the "dangerous Arab" in several ways.

First, the portrayal of positive aspects of life in Palestine often appeals to common values and contradicts the "other" identity. For example, photographs from the Contrast Project, a youth media project in the Bethlehem area, that reflect Palestinian culture (such as traditional crafts, architecture, and food) often

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<sup>12</sup> As d'Estree explains, the amplification of marginalized voices can result in "the de-escalation of protective hostility, the beginning of listening, [and] the reintegration of truths that may have been unexamined or denied" (2005:110).

defy commonly held conceptions of the barbaric other (see Figure 1). Likewise, pictures of children playing, students going to school, and adults working contrast with contrived images of criminals and terrorists. Images of and by children, such as photos of youth playing soccer, or girls swinging at a playground, are especially effective at showing another side of Palestine and appealing to shared values and ideals of childhood. When photos like these were shown in Jerusalem in 2007, they generated dialogue with Israelis about stereotypes of Palestinians, as most of the attendees at the exhibit did not know any Palestinians from the West Bank. One man expressed surprise at the “normalcy” of the people and images of daily life depicted in the photos, as he assumed all parts of Palestine looked “like a war zone,” dominated by militants. Another woman tapped the photo of a Palestinian girl on a swing and commented, “This could be a child anywhere” (See Figure 2).

Images that reflect the difficulties of the political and economic situation in Palestine also generate dialogue. Images of Palestinian towns, cities, farms, and refugee camps provide glimpses into daily life that are “normal” for the Palestinian youth photographers, but are strikingly different to many Israelis. The Israeli woman who was moved by the photo of the girl on the swing noted her surprise at the relative level of poverty in the West Bank, particularly in the refugee camps, as compared to Israeli towns and cities just several kilometers away. Meanwhile, another viewer was struck by the beauty of the Palestinian landscape. The photos indicated the disparities in economic well-being between Israel and Palestine, as well as the efforts of Palestinians to work their farms and

sustain the land (see Figure 3). In these ways, community-based media show everyday people struggling to survive, contrasting with viewers' ideas of Palestinians as militants or terrorists, or as seemingly apathetic.

Finally, images of the occupation, such as checkpoints and the separation barrier, have inspired discussion on the conflict itself, and the tension between security and oppression. Many Israelis have never seen the wall or a checkpoint, and several viewers expressed surprise at the size of the wall, and the fact that the wall and checkpoints exist inside the West Bank (and not just on the Green Line), as illustrated in youth images (see Figure 4). One man, looking at a photograph of several youth participants standing against the separation wall, asked me if we had used software like Photoshop to make the wall look so much larger than the youth. When I explained that the wall was actually eight meters tall in that area, he said he "never knew it really looked like that," having only seen images of the barrier depicted as a short fence.

Youth photographs have thus generated dialogue amongst Israelis, and between Israelis, Palestinians, and internationals at shared events, about the nature of the conflict, the rationale of the occupation policies, and the complexity of security and justice. As d'Estree notes, participatory media allows for the amplification of voice at four levels, providing opportunities for both internal validation and enhanced understanding from the other:

At the first level, there is the ability to voice one's views and experiences, to no longer remain silent, to name. At the second level is the ability to be heard by others... to have these views and experiences take on a more public truth. The third level is to be heard by the Other who has perpetrated the injury. Finally, the fourth level is to have these injuries acknowledged by the perpetrator (2005: 110).

While the above discussion focuses on creating a psychological and sociological space for dialogue, the tangible nature of youth media also facilitates a literal physical space for encounter, dialogue, and the “amplification of voice.”

### *International Advocacy*

Youth media projects can also serve as tools for advocacy and inspire activism internationally. At the international level, youth media appeal to diverse audiences, thus creating new communities with interests in education, organization, and advocacy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this global context, youth media can raise awareness about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, calling specific attention to the ways the conflict affects the lives of young people. Participatory media thus perform intensifying, clarifying, and interpretative functions (Edman 1967; Nagesh 2004) for increasing awareness, enhancing understanding, and often motivating action.

Whereas at the regional level, youth media inspires dialogue by challenging existing paradigms, at the international level, and especially in the United States, youth media often generates discussion by bringing attention to global issues. To use Edman’s framework, youth media and arts *intensify* the experience of the viewer by making us “aware and engaged” (Nagesh 2004: 195) of issues that are often seen as distant or abstract. In the United States for example, despite some “otherist” views held of Arabs or Palestinians, it is more often the case that many Americans lack in-depth knowledge of international conflicts, with information often limited to broadcast news sound bites focusing on top-level developments or escalations of violence. Participatory media can

enhance knowledge of and interest in international issues by reflecting how conflicts are experienced by real people in their daily lives. As Edelman argues, if people “perceive and conceive in the light of narratives, pictures, and images,” then arts and media can become “the medium through which new meanings emerge” (1995: 7; Negash 2004: 187-188). In this way, pluralist media projects contextualize conflicts and provide a more accessible framework for exploring international issues.

For example, when I returned to the U.S. from my fieldwork, I found that many Americans had difficulty understanding that Palestinians are not allowed to enter Jerusalem without a permit. A short video produced by a youth group in Aida Camp illustrating this issue proved to be effective in conveying the significance of Jerusalem’s closure. Likewise, photographs from Picture Balata generated discussions in the US about why there are refugees in Palestine, and why the camps still exist today. Because the discussions are grounded in the words and images of Palestinians themselves, they often have more legitimacy and credibility than a regular speaker might have.

In addition to increasing dialogue and interest on Palestine, youth media can enhance understanding of the conflict by providing a humanitarian lens that focuses on individuals and communities, thus eliciting emotional responses in addition to providing cognitive knowledge. To use Edman’s framework, pluralist media representations can *clarify* issues by providing insight into the lives and feelings of the individuals who created them. According to Edman, “in works of art, sensations are more profoundly and richly clarified; ...emotions are given a

sequence and a development [that] practical life scarcely permit[s]" (1967: 33). In other words, pluralist arts and media can explain the lived realities of individuals within the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, creating an emotional dialogue between the artist and the viewer. For example, when I shared a sample of Palestinian youth photos and short films at a church in New England, an elderly gentleman said to me afterwards that while he had always followed the conflict from the Israeli perspective, the youths' words and images "gave him a lot to think about," as the personal stories reflected dimensions of the conflict that were not covered in his usual sources.

Participatory media can also function as a form of advocacy when viewers *interpret* the meanings of arts and media representations in such a way that inspires action, providing cognitive and emotional codes that may resonate with viewers' own experiences or worldviews and motivate activism. In the case of Palestine, raising awareness about humanitarian concerns and human rights violations through images, films, and arts can inspire individuals and groups to take action to address some of these issues. Activism can range in approach, including talking to others about the issue, organizing teach-ins, participating in marches and demonstrations, signing petitions, joining boycott/divestment campaigns, organizing trips to the region, or appealing directly to policymakers to change certain policies related to Palestine. For example, one American man who attended a Palestinian youth video screening was inspired to learn more about human rights issues in Palestine, and now volunteers to organize events

and teach-ins through churches and peace and justice networks throughout the Northeast United States.

It is thus clear that pluralist media can inform international advocacy and activism through its intensifying, clarifying, and interpretative functions. As Nagesh notes, the arts help “shape political ideas, ... provide the fabric and setting from which political meanings can be derived, ...[and offer] essential tools for restoring emotions... and enhancing our understanding of the political” (2004: 196). In contrast to approaches that aestheticize suffering, evoke pity rather than compassion, and elicit fatigue rather than action (Kleiker and Kay 2007; Moeller 1998), pluralist projects can inspire meaningful action and motivate political change while preserving the dignity and empowerment of the individual.

Youth arts and media can be especially effective for challenging assumptions and offering new ways of thinking about conflict areas like Palestine. Because youth media is a growing global phenomenon, including in the United States, youth-produced media often have wider potential domains of distribution than other participatory projects. For example, films produced by Palestinian youth have been featured at youth media festivals, conferences, and events with participants from around the world, giving the films exposure to audiences beyond Palestinian solidarity networks.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, schools and youth centers often seek youth-produced projects to allow young people to better identify with the artists and producers, especially when they are initiating their own media projects. For example, an art teacher in

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<sup>13</sup> The assumed merits of privileging youth media over other forms of participatory media is beyond the scope of this paper, but deserves further discussion and research.

Washington, DC, used photographs taken by Palestinian youth in the Contrast Project in a workshop with her class, after which the students created a calendar linking images from their communities with those from Palestine. In another example, a church justice committee in New England invited their congregation's youth group to attend a presentation of Palestinian photos and films, primarily because they were produced by youth, thus including their community's young people in an event usually only attended by adults. In these ways, youth media projects can yield wider general distribution, and are often more successful at finding opportunities for targeted distribution in the youth media community.

Youth media are also sometimes considered to be more effective in eliciting understanding and compassion from viewers, young and old alike. While the causes and effects of this dynamic are beyond the scope of this paper, it is evident that viewers seem to feel a common link between youth producers in Palestine and young people in their own communities, perhaps through a presumed (and debatable) ideal of childhood innocence, or simply through images of youth participating in common activities like playing sports. Similarly, the youth perspective also sometimes provides a lens that helps international audiences connect with the characters in ways that resonate across borders. For example, one youth production team in the Voices Beyond Walls project framed a film about the separation wall around a story of kids looking for a place to play, while another group used a story about a group of teenagers trying to get to a friend's birthday party to highlight the issue of checkpoints.



At the same time, youth experiences with violence and measures such as the separation wall, checkpoints, arrests, and curfews, often elicit a special compassion from audience members, who have expressed dismay at Palestinian youth having such difficult childhoods. For example, one woman at a photo exhibit commented that, while she worries about her American teenage daughter driving home after dark, her concerns seemed minor compared to those of Palestinian mothers whose children are growing up in the midst of a violent conflict. Other audience members have expressed their amazement at the Palestinian youths' resilience. Youth-produced representations are also important for reflecting the proactive creativity of young people in Palestine, who are often portrayed solely as perpetrators or victims of violence.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

While youth media initiatives offer opportunities at the individual, community, regional, and international levels, they still face certain limitations and risks. In terms of limitations, because participatory arts/media projects are based at the grassroots level, the extent of their scope of distribution is relatively limited. As Bleiker and Kay note, "pluralist versions are less likely to be used by global media networks as symbols representing a particular issue," thus, "the sociopolitical impact of pluralist photography can only be partial and gradual" (2007: 158). Likewise, community-based projects often have funding concerns that are absent for commercialized media organizations and some professional artists. However, while limiting in some ways, pluralist projects' "rootedness" in

the community can allow them to maintain a sense of independence and ownership, avoiding donor-driven agendas or exploitation of images and other works.

I focus the remainder of this section on examining risks of unequal power dynamics and co-opted agency in some participatory media initiatives. Indeed, as Bleiker and Kay remind us, even pluralist projects are neither wholly authentic nor void of power relations (2007: 157), which can play out on several spectrums. For example, the extent of youth participation and ownership of projects can vary, with some adults using their age advantage to determine a project's direction, despite using the language of youth participation. Power relations can also be evident when projects are coordinated by international activists, organizers, or scholars, who may cause projects to be "shaped by western assumptions about representation" (Bleiker and Kay 2007: 158). Even when coordinators are careful to involve youth, they still often influence the project by providing the materials, funding, skills, and their own esthetic preferences, and may influence the subject matter, style, editing, and exhibition of youth works.

Trainer influence often occurs when coordinators approach youth media projects with the idea that projects not only can, but will and should, serve some political purpose. As the last section clarifies, I do not deny the potential of participatory media projects to influence advocacy and activism. However, when organizers bring that expectation to projects, we may approach our instruction and interpretation of youths' work through our own lenses of justice, and

indirectly impose a narrative of memory and resistance that may or may not be present for the individuals and communities with whom we work.<sup>14</sup>

This issue is perhaps most salient in participatory media projects with refugee youth that emphasize commemorations of the Nakba. As Allan notes, while it is certainly necessary to document that history, “the ethical obligation we have to document the events of the Nakba does not give us the right to speak politically for those whose lives have been determined by 1948” (2008: 254). Indeed, while the events of 1948 no doubt inform the identity of the original refugees and their subsequent generations, the Nakba does not necessarily constitute individual or collective identities, as outsiders in solidarity often assume.<sup>15</sup> In other words, when we adopt political aims and lenses in pluralist projects, we risk co-opting the very agency that we claim to promote.<sup>16</sup> In particular, youth projects focusing on the Nakba may “be putting the burden of remembrance on those with the least resources to realize it” (Allan 2008: 257), creating a “transfer of traumatic memory across generations” and a sort of “surrogate victimhood” (Marks 2008: 5). The primary focus on stories from the

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<sup>14</sup> See Becker (1984) and Bourdieu (1993, 1996) for more on collaboration and competition, respectively, in cultural production.

<sup>15</sup> As Allan writes, “This assumption that refugees from different generations, with vastly different experiences, continue to cling tenaciously to collective memories of Palestine may speak more to our own anxieties of loss and letting go of the past—as scholars and activists in sympathy with Palestinian nationalist aims and the rights of refugees—for fear of political defeat and justice not being done” (2008: 256).

<sup>16</sup> In pluralist projects with individuals of all generations, coordinators can prioritize the representation of collective memory over personal experiences, thus privileging the community over the individual. While pluralist projects often lend themselves to communal representations organically, as discussed earlier, the assumption of shared experiences and narratives can undermine the diversity of voices that pluralist projects claim to amplify.

past can unintentionally limit agency by immobilizing new generations through “inherited nostalgia” (Marks 2008: 5), and making it difficult for “subsequent generations of refugees to articulate a sense of identity and belonging in terms of present realities and their own hopes for the future” (Allan 2008: 257).

Indeed, concentrating solely on the past may hinder youth empowerment by imposing a narrative of victimization, and limit youth agency by privileging the past over present issues or future possibilities. First, focusing on the narrative of violence and suffering can contribute to pity rather than empowerment, and contributes to an image of Palestinians as passive victims, rather than illustrating the strengths of individuals and communities. Second, prioritizing past over present grievances diverts attention from current issues of injustice on which action and mobilization are actually possible. Finally, reiterating the past can ignore the new perspectives that many Palestinian youth are bringing to their individual and collective future. As Allan notes, while recognizing the importance of bearing witness to the past, outsider emphasis on 1948 narratives may not only obscure present-day forms of suffering, but also overshadow “the creative ways in which refugees deal with their traumatic past, their sense of... the future, and the new subject positions being created in relation to it” (2008: 277).

It should be noted that many youth may choose to explore these stories of the past, and if and when such projects are truly youth-initiated, these risks may be minimized. However, when projects are initiated by foreign adults, even when youth are involved, coordinators should be aware that youth may perform certain tropes that they anticipate the audience expects or sympathizes with. On the

other hand, coordinators should not expect an absence of victimization or suffering narratives, as such realities are inherent in many Palestinians' experiences. Based on my fieldwork, any sort of "expectation" is unwarranted and arguably inappropriate in pluralist projects. In Palestine, youth media projects often address issues related to the occupation, as it permeates nearly all facets of life, yet they represent these issues in creative and diverse ways, while also exploring other community issues, personal experiences, and aspects of daily life, both positive and negative.

Those of us who work in the field of youth media like to feel that the pluralist approach "minimizes the oppressive effects of [power] relations by consciously problematizing representation," providing ways through which "multiple perspectives may be seen and validated" (Bleiker and Kay 2007: 158). Yet, while participatory projects are generally more collaborative than other media representations, can we really achieve horizontality (Dagron 2001) when hierarchies of age, class, education, and geography exist between trainers and trainees? Or when projects are framed with the well-intentioned, but still imposed, goal of appealing to specific consumer "markets" of activists and solidarity networks? It may not be possible to completely escape these creative hierarchies, but being conscious of such power dynamics may help us minimize their effects and aim for true local ownership and youth participation in project development.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Another approach to consider is "targeted distribution" (Gregory 2006: 198), which focuses less on the scope of the consumer audience, and more on the nature of the audience and their probability of acting effectively. Similarly, a "glocalization" approach maintains local contexts in such a way that the local accesses the global, but on its own terms" (Gregory 2006: 201).

## **Conclusion**

Participatory media can offer unique opportunities for young Palestinians to actively participate in their local and global communities. First, youth media create positive spaces for youth to explore their experiences, values, and insights, and allows youth to amplify their voices in their communities. Second, youth media offer alternative information sources to raise awareness about conflict situations, while challenging dominant discourses of youth as solely victims or perpetrators of violence. Photographs, films, plays, publications, websites, and other media address issues of injustice in the context of personal realities and community experiences, thus humanizing situations of conflict and oppression, and creating new frameworks for dialogue and action. At the same time, while youth media projects have the potential to function as tools for advocacy and activism, the expectation by outside coordinators that they will serve that purpose may undermine the very agency and empowerment that such initiatives aim to promote. It is thus necessary for participants and coordinators alike to approach such projects with a truly pluralist lens that allows for a variety of voices and diverse forms of expression.

Figures



Figure 1. Woman in Traditional Dress. “This photo shows the traditional Palestinian dress. Its beautiful designs reflect people’s passion for culture and art.” Contrast Project, 2006.



Figure 2. Girl on Swing. "This picture shows how nice it is when a person lives happily, especially a child." Contrast Project, 2006.



Figure 3. Man with Goats. Contrast Project, 2006.





Figure 4. Separation Wall. “Just as a tree has many branches, this photo expresses how the Palestinian people belong to each other and how we are all together against the Occupation.” Contrast Project, 2006.

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