Chapter 7

Whose Voice is Heard?
West Bank News Framing in Israeli Mainstream and Alternative News Websites: Ni’lin 2008 as a Case Study

Keren Sereno
Independent Researcher, Israel

ABSTRACT

Alternative news Websites are a fascinating arena for studying the dynamics between politics, media, and activism. This chapter presents a comparison of news framing in Israeli mainstream news Websites versus Israeli alternative news Websites. To achieve this, 342 items which were published over the course of 14 months (November 2007-December 2008) in 8 Israeli media originations were coded. These items covered the demonstrations and direct actions against the Separation Fence near the Palestinian village of Ni’lin in which Israeli radical left activists took part. The items were coded by qualitative content analysis according to the principles of the Grounded Theory Method. The findings show considerable differences concerning the characters of quoted sources, media frames, coverage patterns, and linking strategies between the mainstream Websites (and print newspaper) and the alternative Websites. Out of those differences, 4 potential political functions that alternative news Websites can fulfill in radical political protests are identified: recruiting activists, consolidating a subversive political consciousness and strengthening the collective identity, building online network between colleague organizations, and distributing and storing controversial information. This research shows that in order to develop a deeper understanding of the role of new media in social protests, it is necessary to simultaneously rely on alternative media, theories, and studies in addition to the emerging knowledge regarding the characters and uses of the Internet in general.

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INTRODUCTION

The alternative media tradition is rooted in history; small radical publications have been identified as far back as 16th century Britain. Since then, and to this day, many counter-cultures, -communities, and -groups which possess subversive ideologies publicly criticize accepted ways of life and directly challenge mainstream media organizations. In the middle of the 1980s, the typewriter was described as a Kalashnikov in the hands of the guerilla journalists (Harcup, 2003). If this was indeed so, one must now, at the onset of the 21st century, ask: what are the roles of the computer keyboard, mouse and Webcam in this war for public opinion and support?

The case study of the protest against the Separation Fence near the Palestinian village of Ni’lin, which was built by the state of Israel, is interesting and important in a theoretical sense, and constitutes an example of a visceral and controversial issue in Israeli politics. This subject was also brought before the Israeli Supreme Court, which ruled, to the disapproval of the Israeli government and the Israeli army (Israel Defense Force -IDF), that the fence’s design was to be altered in certain areas in order to avoid impinging on Palestinian lives. (The most notable consequence of this ruling is in the Palestinian village of Bil’in). Similar to many previous cases, due to the radical character of the struggle in Ni’lin, the organizations and protestors do not receive favorable media exposure, in so much as they receive any media exposure at all, which subsequently leads them to use alternative media outlets.

The current research will present a systematic comparison of the sources, media frames and coverage patterns of 342 items which were published at four alternative news Websites, three mainstream news Websites and the most popular print newspaper in Israel. The aim of this chapter is to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the differences between mainstream news Websites (and one print newspaper) and alternative news Websites in covering the protest-related events that took place near village of Ni’lin during 2008?
2. What can be learned from the above differences about the potential political functions of alternative news Websites for radical protest?

Ni’lin is a Palestinian village located three kilometers east of the “Green Line,” and is a part of the Ramallah district. The village has a population of approximately 5,000 people, most of which were previously employed in Israel and now subsist on agriculture. In 2008, the state of Israel began expropriating agricultural lands belonging to the people of Ni’lin for the purpose of building the separation fence. Protests against these actions began occurring in June 2008, and continue to occur to this day (December 2012) Palestinian, Israeli and international protestors have actively opposed the construction, using direct actions and demonstrations several times a week each week since construction began.

The majority of the Israeli protesters belong to a well-known anarchic group called Anarchists against the Wall (http://www.awalls.org). This group stands for radical anarchist principles covering a variety of issues (i.e., animal rights, LGBTQ rights, etc.), and presents itself as radically politically-left with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The group’s members give top priority to the joint (Israeli and Palestinian) struggle against Israeli military and political establishments. They adopt tactics of direct action following a sense of solidarity with the Palestinian people. This organization was literally born on the ground, in a joint protest camp in the village of Mas’ha in April 2003, and has included a few dozen activists. Most of the members are in their 20s and did not serve in the Israeli army (IDF).