Blogging around and beyond the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Delphine Matthieussent
As a correspondent for Liberation I was exposed to the internet through my blog and the online reactions of my readers. I enjoyed the freedom provided by the internet that allowed through my blog to give a glimpse of daily life here, around and beyond the conflict. But I was also exposed to the backdrops of such an immediate and anonymous media.

My experience as a journalist covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in connection with the internet is double. Firstly it is linked to the blog I ran for about two years that was posted on the Liberation web site. Secondly, my articles and my blog postings put on line on Liberation web site provoked numerous reactions from the readers. The violence of some of these reactions pushed me to think about what was unique to the internet.

First, the blog. My idea in starting it was to try to give an insight about daily life here, everything that is not directly related to the conflict and that I found interesting but never managed to insert in my articles for the newspaper. I called this blog “Greetings from Jerusalem, chronicles of an almost ordinary life”.

I fulfilled an old dream by becoming correspondent for one of the main French newspapers in Jerusalem in 2006. But after having imagined for years checkpoints, secret meetings, tales of war and peace and anonymous sources, I became quite quickly discouraged with “the Conflict” with a big “C”.

As time passes by, it became more and more difficult for me to see the end of the conflict because I had the recurrent feeling of “déjà vu” on the political and diplomatic levels. I was disappointed in the dead end that the so called “peace process” seemed to have reached. I became increasingly interested and even fascinated by so-called “small things”; these small details of ordinary daily life, on the Palestinian and Israeli side, that shed a different light on what is going on here.
Just to give a few examples, I wrote about very trivial things like the arrival hall at Ben Gurion airport that I find so typically Israeli with people shouting and hugging each other. You can also see there the incredible diversity of Israeli society: from religious families arriving with all their kids, to young people having traveled the world after their military service coming back a bit hazed with their huge backpacks. I also wrote about less trivial things like the atmosphere in Jerusalem on “Yom Kippur” (Kippur holy day) and “Yom haShoah” (Day of remembrance of the Holocaust).

Sometimes I couldn’t escape writing about the conflict in my blog but it was from a different angle from what is usually reported in the media. My blog allowed me to report things about the conflict that are rarely reported in the main news media because they don’t fit into one narrative or another (Israeli or Palestinian). Mainly the fact that, despite the closures and the occupation, Israelis and Palestinians do sometimes have contacts.

For example I wrote about the story of Ezzedine abu Al-Aish, this Palestinian doctor working at Tel Aviv Tel Hashomer hospital, who lost three of his four daughters when his house was bombed during the Israeli operation in Gaza in the winter 2008-2009. One of his good friends is Israeli Channel 10 anchor Shlomi Eldar. Just after the bombing of his house, Abou al-Aish called Eldar on his cellphone and begged for help because his fourth daughter was badly injured and he wanted to try to evacuate her to an Israeli hospital. Eldar picked up the phone while he was live on TV. His face turned blank when he hear the screams of abu Al-Aish on his phone. He put the speaker on so that anyone can hear: “Shlomi please, get us out, please...” Eldar interrupted his program, get up and said: “I think I have to go”. He leaved the studio and managed through his contacts to have an ambulance evacuate his friend’s daughter to Israel.

Beyond the content – the fact that I could write about topics that I couldn’t have included in my articles – my blog also allowed a freedom of writing that is often forbidden in journalism. The A-B-C of journalism is to focus on facts and to pretend that as a journalist you are a “neutral observer”, just collecting information and facts and editing them. This is true even when you write a feature piece, as I used to do on a regular basis for Liberation. In my current job at AFP facts are even more important because the stories that we put on the wire are the basis that other journalists use to build their own stories.

What I really enjoyed about the blog is that I didn’t have to pretend anymore that I was this “neutral observer”. On the contrary, it is expected that the author of a blog writes in the first person, expressing his opinions, feelings, analysis of the events he is describing. I could finally say “I”, which is forbidden in most of the cases in print journalism.

Regarding the reactions on Liberation website to the articles I wrote for the newspaper, I was struck by two things. First, the fact that most of the readers were ideologically driven, pro or anti Israel, for or against the Palestinians. They were almost systematically going back the conflict no matter what I was writing about (sometimes culture, society, or other subjects unrelated to the conflict). The article was actually just a pretext for them to give their opinions.

Secondly, the wording of these opinions was sometimes so violent that the moderator of the website decided not to publish them.

My conclusion was that:

- The Internet magnifies the ideological filter through which the conflict is often analyzed.
• The fact that it is anonymous creates a kind of free zone in which verbal violence goes unrestrained (thus the use of the moderator).

To conclude, the Internet allows journalists – through blogging – a different, freer way of writing that is usually accepted in the profession. It also exposes them way more to the reactions of their readers who often use the article as a pretext to express their own opinions taking advantage of the anonymity provided by the internet.

ABSTRACTS

As a correspondent for the French daily newspaper Liberation, the author was exposed to the internet through her blog “Greetings from Jerusalem, chronicles of an almost ordinary life” and the online reactions of her readers. She enjoyed the freedom provided by the internet that allowed through her blog to give a glimpse of daily life here, around and beyond the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. But she was also exposed to the drawbacks of such an immediate and anonymous media.

En tant que correspondante à Jérusalem du quotidien français Libération, l’auteur a été exposée à internet à double titre: à travers son blog "Bons baisers de Jérusalem, chroniques d’une vie presque ordinaire" et également via les réactions des lecteurs sur le site du journal à ses articles parus dans la version papier. Elle a apprécié la liberté qu’offre internet, qui lui a permis, avec son blog, de donner un aperçu de la vie quotidienne ici, autour et au-delà du conflit israélo-palestinien. Mais elle a aussi pu mesurer les risques d’un media aussi immédiat et anonyme.

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Delphine Matthieussent is a journalist with Agence France Presse in Jerusalem. She was the correspondent for French daily newspaper Liberation from 2006 to 2011.