# Media Development

## Democratizing the Public Sphere

# Join the World Association for Christian Communication!

WACC is an international organization that promotes communication as a basic human right, essential to people's dignity and community. Rooted in Christian faith, WACC works with all those denied the right to communicate because of status, identity, or gender. It advocates full access to information and communication, and promotes open and diverse media. WACC strengthens networks of communicators to advance peace, understanding and justice.

## MEMBERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Membership of WACC provides opportunities to network with people of similar interests and values, to learn about and support WACC's work, and to exchange information about global and local questions of communication rights and the democratization of the media.

WACC Members are linked to a Regional Association for the geographic area in which they are based. They receive regular publications, an annual report, and other materials. Regional Associations also produce newsletters. In addition, members are invited to participate in regional and global activities such as seminars, workshops, and webinars.

Full details can be found on WACC's web site:
www.waccglobal.org

## CURRENT MEMBERSHIP RATES

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|---|---|
| Individual | 35 USD |
| Institutional | 120 USD |
| Student Rate | 20 USD |

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## IN THE NEXT ISSUE

The 4/2021 issue of *Media Development* will explore how best to communicate climate change and its impact on local communities. It will also focus on the findings of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2020.

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# Breaking the silence: Public communication in/for Palestine

## Gretchen King

*This article reviews the challenges and opportunities for communicating about Palestine with the goal of promoting civil society actions that centre Palestinian human rights.*

Four generations of Palestinians have resisted the communication apartheid imposed by the Israeli occupation. The most recent attacks by the Israeli military on Palestinian Christians this Easter followed by repeated violence against worshippers at the Al Aqsa Mosque in the occupied city of Jerusalem sparked another Ramadan uprising that was followed by Israel's bombardment of civilians, including the killing of nearly 100 children, in the blockaded Gaza Strip. During this time, Palestinians effectively resisted being silenced in communication spaces from public media to social media.

### Communication occupation and resistance

Briefly, the history of media development in Palestine mirrors the imposition of the Israeli occupation over all aspects of Palestinian economic, social, and political life. Prior to the war of ethnic cleansing and dispossession waged by Zionist militias across historic Palestine in 1948, the Palestinian press and local radio played an active role in the struggle for national liberation. During the war, the occupying forces not only declared the state of Israel, but they seized communication infrastructure across historic Palestine to do so. For example, Zionists took over the studio and transmitter of the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation set up by the British coloni-al authorities. Palestinian owned newspapers and radio stations were destroyed or captured by the Zionist forces, Palestinian journalists were killed or forced into exile.

Over the next decades, Palestinians in historic Palestine had access to few public communication spaces. Palestinian newspapers were systematically shut down by the Israeli occupation forces. Even when newspapers were allowed to circulate the Palestinian narrative, Israeli military censors deleted and modified much of this content through prior censorship required of the press and imposed on all writers, including poets. In the diaspora, Palestinian refugees took up broadcasting in the 1950s – 1980s as a means to connect Palestinians inside of and in the region around Palestine. Palestinian journalists and resistance groups began broadcasting across the borders imposed by the Israeli occupation over state-owned television and radio infrastructure based in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Algeria.

Later, Palestinian resistance groups in the diaspora setup their own radio stations in Lebanon and Syria dedicated to amplifying the fight against the Israeli occupation. During the First Intifada, Palestinian radio stations broadcasting from the diaspora and heard inside of Palestine filled the gap created by rampant media censorship waged by the Israeli military. Palestinians in historic Palestine also turned to graffiti as a means to communicate the news of the Intifada and later, during the last few months of the First Intifada, they would produce the first television public affairs and news programming prepared by Palestinians inside Palestine through a project affiliated with the Institute of Modern Media based at Al-Quds University. These are just some of the diverse public communication strategies used by Palestinians to resist the Israeli occupation.

In the areas of historic Palestine occupied by Israel in 1948, Palestinian-owned media are nearly non-existent due to heavy censorship. However, since the Oslo Accords, the public communication space grew extensively for Pal-

estinians inside the Occupied Territories. As a result of the negotiations that followed the First Intifada, Palestinians in the Occupied Territories could access state-owned and privately-owned media. The Palestinian Authority quickly setup a newspaper along with television and radio broadcasting. The new government of Palestine also setup satellite broadcasting, a national news agency (WAFA), and issued dozens of broadcasting licenses. Soon after the Internet was routed into the Occupied Territories, with Palestinians today having high rates of internet access supporting a growing number of popular news websites that are complimented by high social media and smart phone use. However, all of these connections are restricted due to the control maintained by the Israeli occupation that can and does shut Palestinians off from connecting with the world.

Communication from Palestinians in historic Palestine was cut by the Israeli occupation in 1948. Over time and through a diversity of tactics, Palestinians resisted the silence imposed by the Israeli regime. Despite the communication gains since Oslo, the recent escalation in violence waged by Israel is a reminder that the occupation maintains control over every aspect of Palestinian life, including all forms of communication.

**Censoring public communication**

Across historic Palestine, Palestinian media workers and infrastructure are systematically targeted by occupation forces and colonialist violence. The Israeli military has been accused by press rights organizations of enforcing a shoot to kill policy against Palestinian journalists covering peaceful demonstrations. Media infrastructure in the Occupied Territories is regularly destroyed as demonstrated in the recent bombardment of Gaza that levelled nearly two dozen media offices for local Palestinian and international agencies. As a result of Israel's persistent tactic of targeting media infrastructure in Palestine, many Palestinian media facilities have moved to clandestine locations. When the press working in Palestine is silenced by Israeli military violence, Palestinians across historic Palestine take to the Internet.

The Israeli regime also maintains a digital occupation as detailed by Palestinian scholars like Helga Tawil-Souri. Not only does Israel throttle access to the Internet in Palestine, but it also censors and criminalizes the digital political communication of Palestinians across historic Palestine. Unit 8200 is the largest battalion of the Israeli occupation forces that monitors the com-

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munication activities of Palestinians across all cellular and digital platforms. The Israeli regime has arrested numerous Palestinians for "inciting violence" online, such as Palestinian poet Dareen Tatour, who was imprisoned for three years for publishing her poem "Resist, My People, Resist."

The attacks by Israeli forces on Easter commemorations, Al Aqsa Ramadan gatherings, and the Gaza Strip were accompanied by a surge in online violence, specifically the use of social media by Israeli colonialists to coordinate attacks and incite violence against Palestinians; however, no Israeli has ever been charged with inciting violence online. During the recent attacks against the indigenous population across historic Palestine, Palestinians took to social media to document the violence by Israeli occupation forces and colonialists. From May 6 to May 19, 2021, local digital rights groups like 7amleh, the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, documented over 500 cases of takedowns or the censoring of Palestinian content on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

Around the globe Palestinians and solidarity activists have had content censored across

most social media platforms. This sparked Rashida Tlaib, member of the US Congress, to issue a public letter to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok calling into question the companies' policies for taking down content and for the ceasing of censorship practices to ensure Palestinian voices are heard.

Indeed, social media are dominated by mostly US-based monopolies whose political and economic structures are fundamentally anti-Palestinian. This includes social media company policies that define criticism against Israel as anti-Semitic, accommodate nearly all requests made by Israel to censor Palestinian content or delete their accounts, and appoint Israeli regime censors to decision making positions concerning the application of "community standards."

In the diaspora, Palestinian narratives are also marginalized and censored by private and public media. From newspapers to broadcasters, researchers have documented a persistent bias towards Zionist narratives. Palestinians and their allies in the diaspora objected to the media's biased coverage of the attacks against Al Aqsa and the bombardment of Gaza. In Manchester (UK), thousands of young people gathered outside the government funded BBC to denounce coverage that framed hundreds of Palestinians in Gaza as "dying" in a "conflict" rather than being "killed" by Israel in an ongoing colonial "war".

Before this, Palestinian journalist and founder of the *Electronic Intifada* news website Ali Abunimah was censored by Deutsche Welle, funded by the German government. After broadcasting an interview with Abunimah, the DW network removed the archive of the interview, published regrets, and slandered their Palestinian guest with accusations. This is in addition to thousands of journalists working in private and public media in Canada signing an open letter against the silencing of Palestinians in media coverage, reporting standards in news organizations that restrict the use of the word Palestine, and the increasing retaliation for reporting on Palestine.

**Breaking the silence on apartheid**
Since the printing press arrived in Palestine, the indigenous population has used every communication medium as a tool for national liberation. In the face of the ongoing attacks against Palestinian narratives across public communication spaces, concerted action is required by civil society to pressure media organizations, social media companies, and the Israeli occupation to cease practices that further entrench the apartheid regime in Palestine.

Today, Palestinians are teaching the world how to resist the silencing by the military-industrial-communication-complex resulting from the Israeli occupation and complicity across public, private, and social media organizations. For example, Palestinians and solidarity activists are circumventing social media algorithms and censors by inserting dashes into words or leaving out the vowels. Also, in protest of Facebook censorship over its social media platforms, including Instagram, an online campaign targeted Facebook with negative reviews and one-star ratings in the Apple App and Google Play stores with tangible results as the platform's ratings plummeted.

These online strategies of resistance to social media censorship accompany the persistence of Palestinians in taking public communication space across public, private, and community media to centre the narratives and human rights of the Palestinian people. ∎

Dr Gretchen King is the author of a book chapter called "Palestine: Resilient Media Practices for National Liberation" published in the open access book titled *Arab Media Systems* (Open Book Publishers, 2021). She is also the technical director of the award-winning program Radio Free Palestine and the co-facilitator of the Rally Against Apartheid, a digital media literacy initiative based at Lebanese American University where she is an Assistant Professor of Multimedia Journalism and Communication.