

Arab media adopt citizen journalism to change the dynamics of conflict coverage

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On Dec. 27, 2008, Israel launched a military offensive on the Gaza Strip. The Israeli Air force commenced a massive bombardment campaign with the stated objectives of stopping Hamas rocket attacks on southern Israel and the destruction of arms smuggling routes into the area. By early January 2009, the Israeli Defense Force began a ground invasion. This offensive ended on Jan. 18 following an Israeli declared unilateral ceasefire and a Hamas cease fire announcement. The subsequent withdrawal occurred on Jan. 21, 2009.

This conflict (2008/2009) became characterized by an asymmetric pattern of Hamas firing of inaccurate rockets and Israel responding with superior air force power, augmented by ground invasions causing a high number of Palestinian civilian casualties in comparison to the Israeli count (Zeitsoff, 2009; Kalb, 2007; Zanotti J., 2009). Numbers pointed to the disproportionate number of casualties. Palestinian losses ranged from estimates of 1,166 to 1,417 while the Israelis reported 13 deaths (Hunt, 2010).

This intense one-month battle coincided with a point in time when citizen journalism had just begun to make a mark on the region's media environment. Prior to this war, several developments had taken place indicating that Arab journalism was coming to terms with the changes in the landscape. Bloggers and other citizen journalists had begun to influence traditional media, contributed to the shaping of public opinion during peaks of political moments, attracting both the attention of audiences and government. These peaks included the 2003 War in Iraq, the 2005 Hariri assassination, the 2006 Lebanon crisis, the 2005 multi-candidate election in Egypt and the 2005 Kuwait orange movement. In some instance this grassroots journalism also appeared together with traditional media in a mixed blend (Hamdy, 2009).

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This journalistic transformation was caused by characteristics unique to the region but also by challenges posed to newsrooms worldwide (Dueze, 2008). For many reasons, the Gaza conflict created the ideal situation for the explosion of citizen generated content, the furthering of other manifestations of cultural and technological convergence in journalism and the emergence of some forms of participatory journalism.

Firstly, Arab media, politics and public opinion are strongly influenced and shaped by events that occur in the Arab/Israeli conflict. This is an event of large magnitude and could not pass without receiving extraordinary attention.

Secondly, access to the conflict was limited to traditional journalists (Allow the news media into the Gaza Strip! Appeal by the world's media and Reporters Without Borders to the Israeli authorities, 2009; Bronnan, 2009). Furthermore, this was compounded by the view that entry to Gaza was too dangerous for reporters (Kim, 2009) and reports of Israeli forces targeting media during the offensive (Justice in The News: A Response to Target Media in Gaza, 2009).

Thirdly, both sides of the conflict employed extensive use of social media as weapons with which they struggled to win the public opinion war. Twitter accounts, blogs, Facebook profiles and multimedia clips were used in an effort to diffuse enemy propaganda and create their own propaganda. Contributors to the cyber battlefield on the Israeli side ranged from individuals and advocacy groups with blogs to the Israeli Defense Forces on YouTube, the Foreign Ministry on Twitter. Whilst, on the Gaza end citizens blogged the war and Hamas's military wing had strong internet activity (Gilinsky, 2009; Ward, 2009). This cyber atmosphere added to the credibility of new media it was now being used not just as a propaganda tool but also as a news gathering and news dissemination tool. In addition, supporters of both sides located outside of the physical premises of the conflict also use cyberspace extensively to lobby a global public opinion and influence the international community.

In the case of the Arab World, a combination of these conditions helped reconfigure the world of media bringing a stronger interactivity and alliance between citizen journalists and traditional Arab media.

Media Access and Coverage

Media did not have adequate access to the conflict zone. Foreign media were barred from entry. The Israeli imposed media ban also meant that much of the coverage and reporting was provided by news agencies, or by local journalists and in some cases citizen journalists (Luft, 2009; Bronnan, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2009). Restrictions were also made on Israeli media entry resulting in little reporting on the Gaza side of the war. (Meyer, 2009) This culminated in sanitized monolithic coverage of the war by U.S.-based networks and the Israeli media (Hunt, 2010).

It is also to be noted that despite the availability of Palestinian journalists they were also not always able to provide an adequate alternate source of information. Reports indicate that

Palestinian media, journalists and media employees were direct targets of the Israeli military during the conflict. In fact, the Hamas operated television station *Al Aqsa* was bombed on the second day of the conflict. Later on towers that housed media staff and organizations were also targeted (Justice in The News: A Response to Target Media in Gaza, 2009). In addition, reports showed that Hamas itself also exerted political pressure on Palestine media. An unusual media system that has had relative freedom but has never been able develop into an independent press because of the unique conditions of falling under Israeli occupation (Nasser, 1975) or under the unstable rule of the Palestinian Authority.

Nonetheless, the best and most diverse coverage of the Gaza conflict came from Arab media. With *Al Jazeera* and *Arabiya* at the forefront of this diversification with their oppositional ideologies and journalistic training they brought the most comprehensive type of coverage. Integrating news, programming, background, analysis, visual images, and context, these prominent Arab networks brought viewers into the heart of the war (Pintak, 2009; Khatib, 2001).

These circumstances imply that traditional media coverage of this military operation was marred with a variety of barriers, some physical and some a result of the political conditions in which these media operate, giving more significance to the rise of other modes of war coverage. In fact, the media tactics from the opponents of the Israeli's were highly effective as they often depended on non-traditional forms of media (Hunt, 2010).

Al Jazeera, citizen journalism and the conflict

The Gaza conflict was the focus of Arab televisions with the geopolitical rivalries intensifying between the two influential news channels, *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya*. The politicized stations of the region either took the Hamas side and relied heavily on visual footage of carnage, or took a more pro Fatah side and choice to avoid the graphic pictures (Pintak, 2009).

Al Jazeera was a few steps ahead of other Arab media. This is evident in its ability to quickly recognize their unique position as one of the few news organizations with strong presence on the ground in Gaza and capitalize on that by deciding to aggressively use the Internet to distribute its content and further its reach. Video material of the war became wide spread through a Creative Commons license, making footage available to any user who gave credit to *Al Jazeera*, and a dedicated YouTube channel was created. In addition, a twitter feed that tweeted continuous updates on the war to its followers (Cohen, 2009; Ward, 2009).

Al Jazeera's network executives also paid attention to their potential influence through cyberspace and on virtual communities. In addition, they appear to have developed an inherent respect, understanding and acknowledgment of citizen journalism, individual bloggers and social media users (Al-Atrqci, 2009; Minty, 2009). *Al Jazeera* executives may have been driven by a main desire to reach global audiences in unreachable markets and provide balance to the western flow of information (Cohen, 2009) but they also recognize the power of their cyber influence in a

regional context. The Arab region has about 58 million Internet users, 20 million Facebook users, 600,000 active blogs and growing (One Social Network With a Rebelious Message, 2009).

During this conflict a “crowd sourcing” reporting platform (*Ushahidi*) was set up allowing a mix of citizens and reporters in the conflict zone to contribute to the coverage with SMS and Twitter messages that then were authenticated by editors and used to add a real time coverage and monitoring of the war dynamics.²

The timeline was accurate usually within a few minutes of the actual occurrence of the event, detailing the coverage of the airstrikes and ground offensives by including precise geo-graphic information on each clash. The micro-reporting added an important dimension to the mainstream reporting of the war (Zeitsoff, 2009; Ward, 2009), suggesting that this new dimension was not just well planned but may have added an important aspect of war coverage previously not used by Arab media. An interactive map could contextualize the conflict and allow for audiences to do their own fact checking.

During interviews with *Al Jazeera* English Website executives it became evident that those involved with the digital media platform and other Web-based input had a deep understanding of the potential of the new media but did keep a distance by separating professional journalism from the input of citizen reporters. Noting that *Al Jazeera* personnel first began to notice user-generated content during the 2003 war in Iraq when the bloggers inside of the country began to give their personal account of the situation at hand. Their approach at that time was fresh. When all the mainstream media could bring was a report of an attack in a Baghdad suburb, the bloggers could add detail, context and personalization to the account. In the beginning there was reluctance to incorporate bloggers’ accounts for lack of verification. *Al Jazeera* journalists went as far as discrediting bloggers but eventually bloggers and the citizen journalism communities were able to prove that they could work in tandem with the media. Yet, *Al Jazeera* did not use citizen reports until the 2008 siege of Gaza. Reports such as one from a charity worker writing about his life during that period spawned a series of reports and became very popular with readers. Another citizen with reports on medical conditions amongst others was equally as effective in informing and keeping the attention of readers. This is when the new media team slowly realized that such reports authored by non journalists and not editorially supervised had a strong following. Previous developments also included citizen opinions gathered from the Obama elections edited into video packages and broadcast. These were followed by a report on the universal declaration of human rights which combined citizen-generated content from around the world. The television newsroom began to ask the new media division for more viewer opinion, comment and contribution during the elections. “Your media” on the English Channel and “*Sharek*” on the Arabic *Al Jazeera* were created (See Figure 1). Audience members could send pictures, comments and videos to the online site. A portion of this material could then be fed for broadcast on television. This would also increase interactivity with citizens.

² Al Jazeera’s War on Gaza reporting platform found at <http://labs.aljazeera.net/warongaza/>

Figure 1. Al Jazeera English Twitter Live



The Gaza story pushed the threshold of normal citizens partaking in the journalism experience. Al-Atrqchi measures the success of these and other incidents of citizen input but the fact that *Al Jazeera* television has asked its new media unit to supply this type of citizen participation for major global news story. Furthermore the network which includes both the Arabic and English stations is investing time and energy in a committee that is reviewing possible progress and innovation in this area (Al-Atrqchi, 2009).

Such progress is important because it comes from *Al Jazeera*, the station that launched in 1996 bringing Western-style, hard-hitting, in-depth objective reporting following decades of state-orchestrated news coverage and heralding a new era of media in the region. This phenomenon was labeled the “*Al Jazeera Effect*” because of its liberating influence and its ability to bring public debate into the Arab home and street (Lynch, 2006; Nötzold, 2009).

The “*Al Jazeera Effect*” has not subsided. It continues to receive attention from its viewers, and from observers who are intrigued by this network (Seib, 2008). No doubt their cyber experiments will also be noticed and copied by other media in the region further pushing the influence of the ordinary person on the news agenda and public opinion.

Al Jazeera's new media unit was created late 2006 with the mandate to outline and implement a strategy of new media that would push the network to the forefront of this field. In fact, this became evident when the decision was taken to stream broadcasts through the Livestation service, to create Twitter feeds that refer back to its online material, and to use the most unrestrictive licensing for copyright. *Al Jazeera* is exposing its message to a global audience through this viral distribution campaign, in a manner that is revolutionary relative to others including their Western counterparts. The Gaza war was the catalyst for this innovation but members of the team feel that this will soon become a conventional standard of journalism as the technologies become more mature (Minty, 2009).

Other Arab media may have been slower in their response to citizen media. Nonetheless, with the influential *Al Jazeera* and the development of user-friendly, low cost technologies more news media are choosing to provide opportunity for users to contribute.

With every crisis, political peak and conflict in the region it has been noted that the Arab online community has participated in providing, commenting on and correcting the news not always at the invitation of mainstream media but because they have imposed themselves despite restrictions (Hamdy, 2009).

New media another war zone

The traditional media methods of war coverage are changing. The Gaza conflict has furthered the argument that contemporary wars have an added cyber dimension. In fact, new media and the blogosphere caused such alarm during this conflict that the Israeli military spokesperson referred to them as a "War Zone" (Schleifer, 2009).

But other than put fear in the heart of Israeli propagandists, did *Al Jazeera's* experiment have any success?

The most visible result of the *Al Jazeera's* Internet effort has been its global reach. The Arab perspective on events and particularly on the Israeli/Middle East conflict has rarely been received in the U.S., many parts of Europe or Australia. This timely initiative translated to a jump of 600% in worldwide viewership of the AJE's website. A reported increase from 3 million to 17 million within minutes means that the Website is penetrating audiences who have not had access the television station (Meade, 2009; Cohen, 2009). This war for Arab viewers was 24/7 pictures of death and destruction. The *Al Jazeera* television networks focused on killings and injuries of Palestinians, the bombing of mosques, schools and apartment buildings. The popularly viewed *Al Jazeera* had a strong psychological impact on the majority of the Arab masses. This was the war that people saw. On the other hand the Western media broadcast a different account of the war. Only through the Internet could a Western audience have access to the same images and inherent perspective as those viewed by Arab audiences (Borchgrave, 2009; Pintak, 2009).

Access to an Arab perspective of the conflict can potentially influence global public opinion. It may not be possible to measure that impact may not be possible but it is certainly a significant change to the global flow of information.

This Internet flow also carries a portion of content that reflect grassroots journalism and an alternate perspective from the citizens of the Arab region to the global community. These voices have not been heard so directly before.

In addition, Arab audiences both in the region and in Diaspora did access the *Al Jazeera* Websites directly or they received the same information through emails, YouTube, Facebook and other social networks.

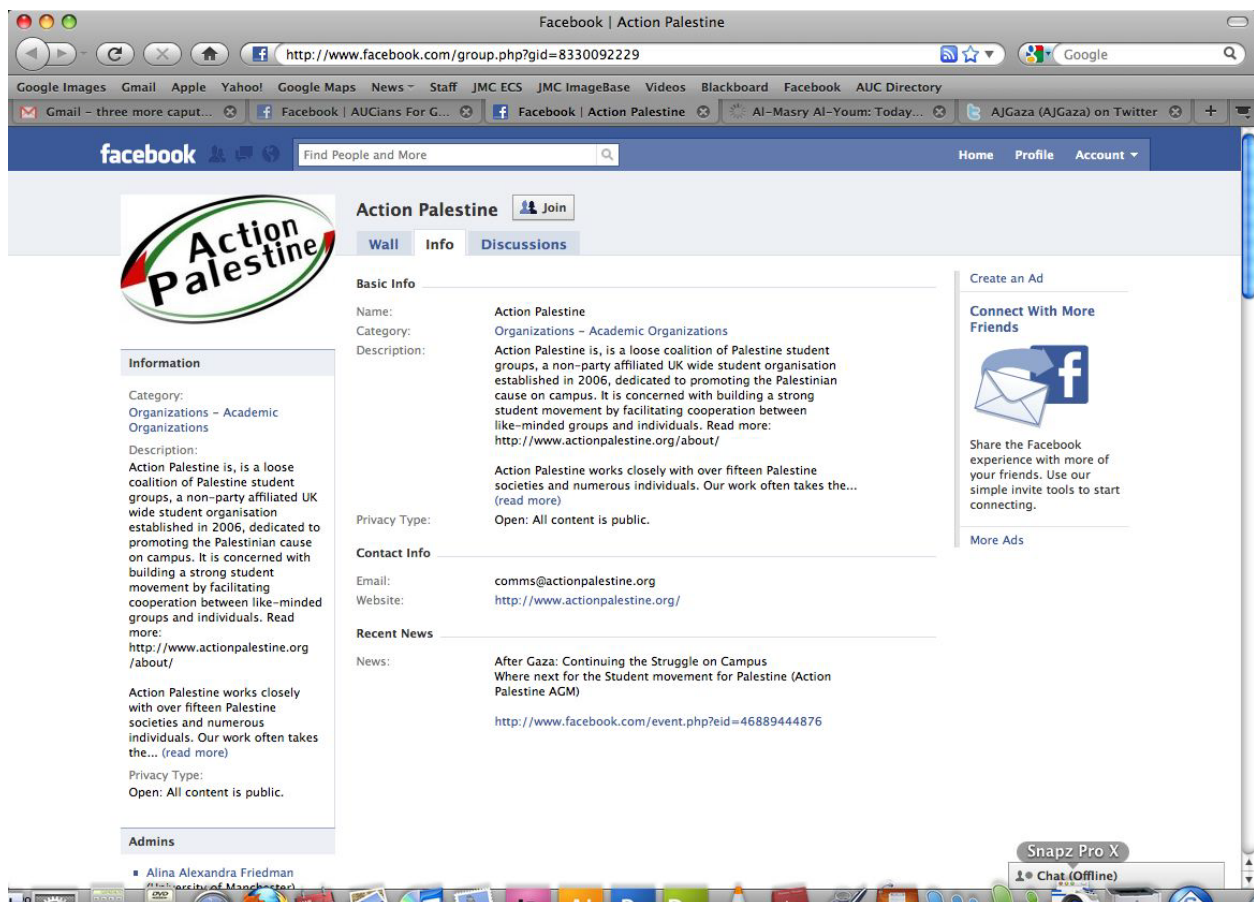
Figure 2. *Al Jazeera* encourages tweets



In fact, during the actual conflict and on its first anniversary much of this fare circulated amongst Arab youth in particular. Emails with links to YouTube footage of alleged Egyptian

police beatings of Gaza peace activists³ and Facebook student activist groups⁴ appeared on many computer screens. These expressions also link Arab youth globally. (See Figures 3 & 4). Without doubt, raising awareness and influencing the opinion of the youth has much value in a region known for its youth bulge. An estimated 65% of the region's population is under 30 (Dhillon, 2008).

Figure 3. Facebook appeal to join discourse



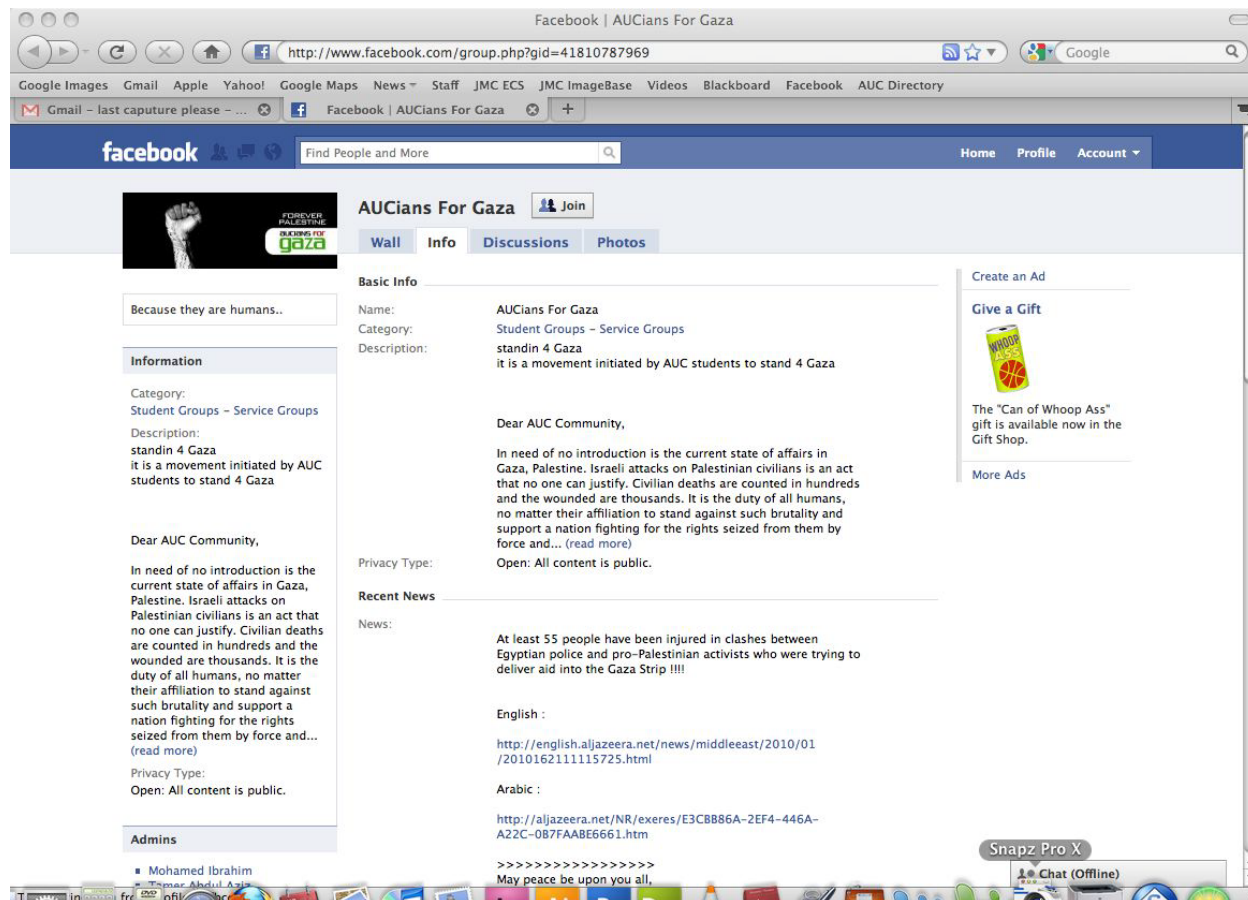
This conflict with its cyber angle has altered the traditional war coverage. At this point in history the once insulated Arab media environment is developing quickly. (Nötzold, 2009) As more media join the Arab landscape the acceptance and adoption of citizen journalism is also increasing. One indication is how the flurry of newly published newspapers have simultaneously launched websites and incorporated citizen expressions. *Masry El Youm*, an independent

³ Link to YouTube footage can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yT4tk2RiNIo>

⁴ Student Facebook Group can found at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=41810787969>

Egyptian newspaper, is a good example of this. Launching an English edition online in the summer of 2009, this bold Website employs Egypt's most prominent bloggers/activists including the News Editor Hossam el-Hamalawy. Naturally, they brought their technical skills and understanding of the active role the public can play in news process to their traditional media jobs. The website has contracted a British owned firm Demotix to provide a constant stream of global citizen photo-journalism. It provides lively discussion opportunities, Twitters it's headlines, uses Facebook fan pages to publish, promote and interact with citizens, and embeds links to both blogs in their stories and to contributions from citizens.⁵ (See Figure 5) Taking participatory journalism seriously, in the coverage of the construction of a wall on the Gaza border in 2010, pictures contributed by a "smuggler" were publicly credited to the smuggler and posted on the Website (Bossone, 2010).

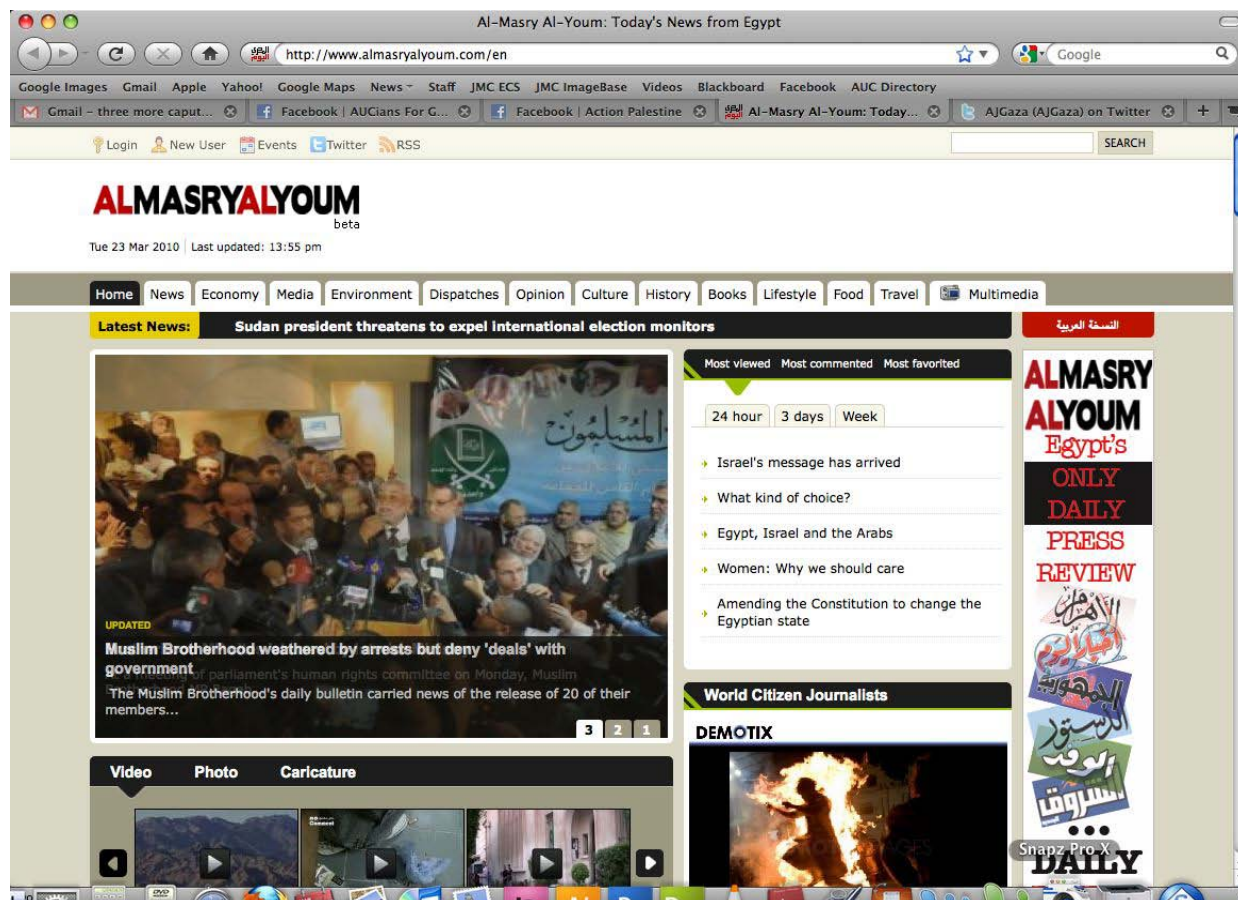
Figure 4. Facebook page appealing to students at the American University in Cairo.



⁵ Masry Al Youm English Website can be viewed at: <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en>

The English edition enjoys wider parameters of freedom but, it does share the multimedia desk and some stories with the Arabic newspaper (Sandels, 2009). It cannot be said that this site was influenced solely by *Al Jazeera*. This effort has grown out of Egypt's own grassroots cyber movements but is safe to say that this is all a part of the general regional media changes that began with the Arab satellite revolution spawned by *Al Jazeera*.

Figure 5. Independent Egyptian paper *Al Masry Al Youm*'s site



There are many similar examples to be observed today⁶. The significance of this trend cannot be ignored as the number of Internet users in the Arab world continues to grow exponentially. From a few hundred to 58 million in less than a decade with further growth expected after the groundbreaking move of Arabic domains registration (Vinograd, 2009). As the digital world and physical worlds blur further the Internet will become the information hub for a large percentage of the population. Social media, Web 2.0 and future Internet applications will bring more

⁶ Al Shrouk independent Newspaper website can be viewed at <http://www.shorouknews.com/>

opportunities to those who wish to contribute to the news process. Traditional gate keeping methods will continue to erode and Arab governments and political media will continue to lose their grip on media content. In the end, citizens will be able to add to the widening spectrum of perspectives allowing for more representation of people and less of the authoritative opinions. Mobilizing and manipulating the public will not be as simple as it has been in the past as more views contribute to the discourse surrounding each conflict, whether Arab/Israeli or otherwise. No doubt the next conflict will allow for more independent coverage as more Arab citizens bring additional sources to help society get a better understanding of the situation at hand.

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