Palestinian Media Discourse During COVID-19 Crisis: A lost Opportunity to Restore Public's Confidence

Prepared by Journalist Hazem Balousha

Just like other sectors, the media had an important role in the Corona pandemic, whether positive or negative. Media discourse was not limited to media outlets alone. Various sectors participated in it including official, civil (NGOs) and international organizations, in addition to traditional and social media platforms.

This paper provides a quick overview of the nature of the media discourse, which was practiced locally in dealing with the Corona pandemic, and the impact it had on the general public, according to preliminary estimates and close follow-up of what's been going on, in addition to analyzing data and press summaries, and some of the published media materials.

In short, the Palestinian media discourse did not do well in light of the «COVID-19» crisis, which began in Palestine since the beginning of March.

Usually, infectious diseases and their rapid spread scare people, just as false news can spread quickly and generate suspicion easily.

Likewise, the Palestinian media discourse, in light of the Corona crisis, was not up to the challenge and the crisis. It was more like a carbon copy of what is issued by the Ministry of Health and official institutions, without serious research or investigation beyond the official news and statements.

Media only gave superficial awareness and criticism mostly based on the political divide prevailing in Palestine since 2007, and comparing the performance of the PA in the West Bank to that of the ruling authorities in Gaza Strip, led by Hamas.

Emotions had a large portion in the Palestinian media discourse at its various levels, be it official or NGO-based, and even public and private media.

Social media in Palestine also constituted a large area of influence during the Corona crisis, and in some instances, it dominated the news, especially with regard to false and fabricated ones, which had a certain impact on the general public.

Specialized service media was not clearly present during the Corona pandemic period. Media and NGOs did not manage to turn their rhetoric into a major source of information, that could help the authorities in limiting the spread of the virus or reassuring the public.

The official discourse was limited to two parts: the first part is used to promote the activities of official institutions, with some emotional speeches, and within the framework of public relations. The second part is some form of awareness, which mainly depends on international and national NGOs, with no cooperation between them regarding final outputs. This was evident in some of the differences in the published content, which is distributed in the form of publications, and sometimes educational videos.

The media discourse, especially the official and the NGO-based ones, lacked the means to communicate with people with disabilities such as those with hearing disabilities and others. It was possible for them to incorporate sign language at least in some press conferences or TV news casts, or perhaps prepare some brochures for them.

There was an important opportunity for all media and NGOs to restore Palestinian public's confidence in them during the COVID19 crisis, but it did not seem they managed to do so at this point due to many factors related to declining funds as well as their limited abilities to use media or take advantage of the opportunity, especially at a time the public does not trust governmental efforts due to political difference.

In general, the public needs a reassurance base that can be relied upon at times of crises. Media outlets and NGOs could've been that base, but the task seemed more difficult than to be picked up by them.

The paper discusses the media discourse for each side, its nature and method of performance:

Official Discourse:

The official rhetoric of dealing with the Corona crisis was not consistent as a result of the political and geographical divide. This difference began when politicians had varied opinions regarding Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's decision to declare a state of emergency on the fifth of March 2020.

The ruling authorities in Gaza Strip took a different position at first, and considered that people in the Strip are far from getting Corona virus, and that the blockade, which has been in place for many years, may prevent its arrival, but soon things changed when the virus spread in a number of surrounding countries, and danger began to approach closer .

The two geographical regions (Gaza and the West Bank) dealt differently with the crisis. Consequently, this was reflected on the media discourse of the two opposing side, thus constituting a contradiction in awareness among the general public.

While the Palestinian Authority was organizing a press conference, every day, to announce the developments of the crisis, the authorities in Gaza began to organize a similar conference, and sometimes they were held at the same time, which was an indication of an apparent political competition.

The nature of outputs about the cases affected by COVID19- and the details differed between Gaza Strip and the West Bank. While there were details about the cases and their locations, their ages and the source of their infection in the West Bank, the authorities in Gaza only announced the numbers of cases, with the exception of revealing some details about a few cases.

Although each side tried to exploit the political situation during the crisis and there was an exchange of accusations between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza with regard to medical supplies and examination of cases, etc., the matter did not occupy much space in the media, as was the practice in similar crises. The public's main interest was to get reassured about the health status and that measures taken can prevent the spread of the virus among Palestinians in the Palestinian territories.

With regard to awareness, the official public awareness about the mechanisms to deal with the virus was limited to traditional means, which did not reach large sectors of the public. They were often in the form of publications originating from the World Health Organization, as well as some relevant NGOs. There were also some large billboards in the streets in the Gaza Strip, that were hung a bit late, calling upon people only to wear face masks.

Official media did not address how marginalized and poor groups can deal with the virus, and how to protect themselves from infection in the event that there was a widespread of the virus. Also, official announcements were sometimes limited to the main areas, not taking into consideration extending them to marginalized areas.

Informal and NGOs Media Discourse:

NGOs are among the most prominent unofficial bodies that have dealt with the Corona pandemic, but as a result of conditions related to the situation on the ground as well as declining funding, in addition to political division, their role came within a restricted framework.

The call by NGOs to form a unified national body to deal with the Corona crisis is the most important call, in order to unify efforts between the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the face of the pandemic.

NGOs kept their employees at home during the lock-down period, and most of the work was done remotely and via the Internet.

Awareness raising and workshops were conducted remotely, which faced many difficulties, such as those faced by distance learning.

Some NGOs missed part of their role, which they were supposed to play in the field of awareness. Their activities in this context were also restricted, given the same conditions mentioned above.

Health institutions naturally formed the cornerstone of the role of NGOs in their field work, but their work did not have the media coverage as it should have had.

There were some interventions made by some civil human rights organizations, but their media discourse was not proportionate in quantity or quality to the Palestinian media scene related to the Corona crisis.

Traditional Media:

The Palestinian media is divided into three types. The first is the official one which is affiliated with the Palestinian Authority, and some are affiliated with the Hamas authority in Gaza. The second belongs to various Palestinian factions, while non-partisan and private institutions form a small part of the local media.

The political division has been manifested in the performance of the various media outlets, according to which side they are affiliated with, while private media, which are often entertaining and do not deal with political issues in a significant way, remain out of sight in general.

So Palestinian media appeared to be a carbon copy of what is issued by the official institutions, without any investigations or double checking the details of what is happening. It was limited to listing some clarifications from various officials.

The lack of a law guaranteeing the right to access information in the Palestinian territories has made access to official information a difficult and arduous task, and easy to deny if the message is different from the directions of the official authorities or was carrying a criticism for them.

During this COVID19 crisis, media outlets had an opportunity to restore the public's confidence in them, especially that social media outlets were filled with fabricated and false news. The official source of information for traditional official media was TV stations, radio stations and newspapers, as well as official electronic websites.

Just like many other sectors, the political dispute was often dominant, and each party trying to appear as if they're the hero in dealing with the crisis limited the ability of the media to provide professional coverage. Also, shortage in funds and financial capabilities of media institutions had a great impact on their performance prior to and during the crisis.

Lack of service journalism and journalists specializing in health has also had an impact on the way the media is dealing with the crisis and covering it.

Palestinian political and economic situation has clearly affected the media. All sectors have been financially affected and did not receive any assistance from the government, which in turn had an impact on media, especially private media outlets which rely mainly on advertisements and promotional materials. factions-related financing agencies have also been affected, which led to more staff reductions than before the Corona pandemic.

It cannot be said that the performance of traditional media outlets was completely negative, because they tried very hard under difficult political circumstances to exercise their role in disseminating information. They also played an important role in spreading accurate news in light of the widespread of false news on the various social media platforms.

Social Media:

Social media, especially Facebook, comprise the biggest source of information for the

general public, according to the latest studies and opinion polls in Palestine, which showed the same results in light of the Corona pandemic as well.

The public relied mainly on social media as a source of information, which was often wrong or completely false. This has posed a burden on the various sides, whether governmental, civil, or media in verifying information and materials published on various platforms.

In light of the absence of a transparent, accurate, and truthful source of information, false, inaccurate, and misleading news spread through social media, which sometimes was copied by traditional media without verification.

Lack of transparency by the official authorities, and the public's thirst for information, gave social media platforms, which allow everyone with an account to publish on them, an important space to influence the general public and their behavior, and their impact was more pronounced under the Corona pandemic.

Traditional media, as well as NGOs, and even governmental media used social media platforms, but they limited their use to publishing on their own official pages, which have no interaction compared to pages of activists and influencers on those platforms.

Official and non-governmental organizations tried to deny some of the false information spread on social media, but the impact of that news remained, even if it was denied. The situation worsened in light of the political situation and the current division in the Palestinian territories.

And since it is not possible to completely control publishing on social media, adopting transparency and the right to access information by other media sources, was one of the most important factors in limiting rumors, which social media platforms are considered to be the main source for.

Nevertheless, social media networks played an important role in communicating information to the public, in light of the extensive followers it has, even if the proportion of correct information is far less than false information, whether in its content or its impact.

Recommendations:

Based on the above, we recommend the following:

- There needs to be attempts to unify the Palestinian media discourse at the governmental and NGOs levels, by agreeing on one information base (database).

- Putting pressure on government agencies to adopt transparency in disseminating information, rather than adopting a policy that is appropriate to their interests only.

- Enhancing the role of the media and public relations departments of NGOs, and the optimal ways to reach and influence the public.

- Training civil organizations and their employees on the best and modern ways to deal with crises with regard to raising awareness and addressing the public and the media.

- NGOs should continuously try to coordinate efforts between different parties, in order to reach the best results.

- Benefiting from media experiences in other countries, especially Western countries, in media coverage of the pandemic and drawing experiences from successful examples.

- Positive engagement with persons with disabilities, especially people with hearing impairments, the use of sign language in at least official speeches, and encouraging local media to designate certain times in some broadcasts for sign language.

- NGOs should prepare contingency plans that include media coverage, and not be limited to inviting the media to cover some activities, but rather to expand this by more creative means.

- Training of journalists and media outlets in service and specialized media.

- Diversify the forms of journalism used by the local Palestinian media and not limit them to publishing news.

- Strengthening the economic resilience of private media as much as possible.

- Monitoring social media and misinformation and trying to correct it.

- To enhance the accessibility of public relations representatives in institutions, and to recruit specialists in social media to work at NGOs.

- The use of different styles and modern forms in publishing, such as video graphs and infographics, and others.

- The use of smart phone applications in disseminating information, dealing with privacy issues, and not copying what is published on those applications.

- Using electronic means of verification and educating concerned public about those means, which can reduce the impact of the rumors.