THE *MAVI MARMARA* AT THE FRONTLINES OF WEB 2.0

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This essay reviews the "YouTube war" over the deadly raid on the Mavi Marmara *in light of Israel's recent forays into social media. It explores the implications of state use of grassroots media platforms, examines the widespread perception that this has been a fiasco thus far for Israel, and critiques general claims that the rise of Web 2.0 entails a democratic "leveling" effect in information wars like that over Israel-Palestine.*

WITHIN HOURS OF Israeli commandos' deadly raid on 31 May 2010 on the *Mavi Marmara,* the Turkish aid ship attempting to break the siege of Gaza as part of a six-ship Freedom Flotilla, the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) official public relations (PR) and media body had uploaded a series of videos of the attack on the flotilla to YouTube. Edited from footage confiscated from professional journalists, pro-Palestinian activists, CCTV cameras onboard, and IDF surveillance, these videos shaped the U.S. media's understanding of the raid. While the journalists and activists were held incommunicado for days, Israel used the media blackout to present its narrative, justifying the killing of civilian activists by claiming that soldiers were forced to open fire in self-defense. The video footage, we were told, spoke for itself.

One clip, "Demonstrators Use Violence against Israeli Navy Soldiers Attempting to Board Ship," presented a low-resolution aerial view of the melee on deck, looking like an anthill after a stick has been rammed into it.[1] Whatever else this video evidence does, it doesn't speak for itself; rather, the IDF speaks for it. "Tens of rioters hit an IDF soldier and try to kidnap him," reads one caption. "Stun grenade thrown at soldiers," reads another, but it is impossible to make out visually who is throwing what toward whom. Another clip clearly shows rappelling IDF soldiers being beaten (and in one case, thrown from the ship's upper deck), but as the low-resolution fragment is soundless, with its time code removed, there is no way to determine its place in the sequence of the raid, nor—crucially—whether soldiers at that point had already begun shooting passengers. In the pixilated murk and panicky commotion, we were asked to see clear evidence of premeditation and initiation of violence on the part of the activists onboard.

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Pro-Palestinian bloggers and commentators—as well as the journalists and activists who had been onboard the *Mavi Marmara*, once they were released from Israeli detention days later—scoffed at this PR strategy, pointing out the evidentiary gaps and the fact that the vast preponderance of video and photographic evidence remained suppressed. Meanwhile, photos and footage successfully smuggled off the ship (in one instance, in a documentary filmmaker's underwear) began appearing online, dramatically contradicting the Israeli narrative. A multifaceted online information war ensued, not only on YouTube but also on Twitter, Facebook, and in the blogosphere.

This battle might be said to have reached its late phase some three months later, when, on 11 August 2010, a satirical group calling itself Minor Demographic Threat released a mashup music video,[2] "Internet Killed Israeli PR," that quickly became a minor viral hit.[3] Set to an ebullient if sophomoric musical parody of the 1979 "Video Killed the Radio Star" (sample lyrics: "The Shin Bet mined my SD card / and played it back on NPR / Born and raised in Arkansas / I brought six nukes for the Hamas"), the four-minute piece intercuts the IDF's *Mavi Marmara* clips with staccato loops of seemingly robotic Israeli spokespeople, video-game sequences, a Monty-Pythonesque cut-and-paste of Theodor Herzl waterskiing, 1970s TV advertisement footage of children playing "Battleship," Milli Vanilli lip-syncing, a digital dancing baby circled in yellow pen and labeled a "known al-Qaeda operative,"[4] a vintage photograph of Barbara Streisand wielding a "non-IDF knife" over a wedding cake, shots of newscasters dissolving into helpless laughter, and so on, in a free-for-all send-up of ham-fisted *hasbara*.[5] There are jokes within jokes, and then in-jokes within these.[6] Aging hipsters can have a field day with the generational references: a looping jump-cut of Republican pollster Frank Luntz on a TV talk show leaves him looking like he is playing air-guitar; Minor Demographic Threat's very name nods past Greater Israel's population predicament to a short-lived U.S. punk band from the early 1980s; and the shot of a cat, with ramrod arms, splayed claws, and a tight grimace, playing the piano alludes to a longstanding online tradition, practiced by a certain subculture of netnerds and no one else, of anthropomorphizing felines for no particular reason at all. The whole production flirts with irrelevance, eschewing direct political satire in favor of knowing winks at the medium of online mashup itself.

And this, of course, is the point. Viral video is now to Israel-Palestine what the Olympics were to the cold war: a site of proxy conflict where style and bravado are all. "Internet Killed Israeli P.R." is an airy riposte not only to misleading YouTube clips released by the IDF but also to the post-flotilla *hasbara* video "We Con the World" (itself a take-off of United Support of Artists for Africa's 1985 hit "We Are the World").[7] Produced by *Jerusalem Post* columnist Caroline Glick (formerly of the IDF's Military Advocate General), "We Con the World" racked up over a million views within days, was pronounced hilarious by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's spokesman Mark Regev, and was initially promoted to foreign journalists

by Israel's Government Press Office (GPO; the GPO later removed the link from its Web site and denied involvement with the video's production).[8] To a certain sort of viewer, however, the clip is embarrassing, its message toying with denialism ("There's no people dying / So the best that we can do / Is create the greatest bluff of all," referring to Gaza), its humor turning on Israelis in "Arabface" donning kaffiyehs and affecting thick accents, its editing unironically decades out of date, its only pop-cultural points of reference a twenty-five-year-old pop-celebrity fundraiser and the old daytime television show *The Love Boat*. It is against this backdrop—this fusion of reactionary politics and an unwittingly passé aesthetics of propaganda—that Minor Demographic Threat's hip self-awareness begins to make sense, even to take on a political valence. "We chose to base the piece on 'Video Killed the Radio Star' because, much like the original, this piece is about the inability of a communicator to adapt to a new medium," the group told Mondoweiss blog.[9] "That's exactly what we're seeing with the Israeli PR apparatus as it struggles to remain effective in an increasingly democratized media landscape."

That PR struggle might be said to have begun a decade ago with the Muhammad al-Dura footage, the Israel-Palestine conflict's first viral video. Filmed at the Netzarim junction in Gaza by a French cameraman on 30 September 2000, two days into the second intifada (and five years before the invention of YouTube), the death of a twelve-year-old boy in the arms of his father was watched by tens of millions; it has been broadcast, emailed, studied, reenacted, painted, and put into verse; it has occasioned as many conspiracy theories as the Zapruder film of JFK's assassination. The prominent U.S. journalist James Fallows professes to have watched it over a hundred times and notes that "to a billion people in the Muslim world it is an infamous symbol of grievance against Israel." The video featured in the Israeli Military Academy's course in "National Security and Mass Media," whose instructor in 2002 predicted, accurately, that "the lasting iconic image" of the second intifada "would be the frightened face of [Muhammad] al-Dura."[10]

At that time it was still possible for those invested in Israeli public relations to think of the al-Dura clip as an unfortunate fluke, something like the Rodney King video for the Los Angeles Police Department.[11] In the years since, the means to capture, edit, and disseminate video have become cheap and ubiquitous. The Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem has distributed hundreds of cameras in the West Bank, and for over three years now settler attacks on Palestinians have been regularly uploaded to YouTube.[12] Amateur video is at the frontlines of the current controversy over the evictions of Palestinians from the Silwan neighborhood of East Jerusalem.[13] Israel meanwhile has moved from defense to offense, editing and uploading its own low-resolution videos of the 2008 invasion of Gaza, and the recent commando raid on the *Mavi Marmara*. And with the advent of "social media"— sometimes called "Web 2.0," which collectively includes not only YouTube but the blogosphere, Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, indeed any media platform that allows instant self-publication—the war of words and the war of

images have become guerrilla wars, at ground level seamlessly interwoven. At this point, the pixilated image of Muhammad al-Dura is emblematic not only of the second intifada but also of the viral, digital, and—by many influential accounts—populist stage of the conflict's information war we find ourselves now immersed in.

HASBARA IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In the age of Web 2.0, with the ascendancy of user-generated content and the era of "democratized" information it supposedly ushers in, propaganda—even state propaganda—has become the domain of the amateur. Clumsily or not, no state has mobilized more quickly in its efforts to assimilate this media environment than Israel. "The blogosphere and the new media are basically a war zone in a battle for world opinion," an IDF spokeswoman told *Ha'Aretz* almost two years ago. That was when the IDF unveiled its own YouTube channel in late December 2008, at the same time it launched its Operation Cast Lead war on Gaza and began uploading grainy, heavily captioned clips of aerial footage purporting to prove that the destruction visited upon Gaza was directed at legitimate military targets rather than civilian infrastructure.[14] Although the assortment of clips, taken throughout the month-long invasion, is supposed to provide clear evidence of the presence of Hamas operatives at work, the footage is almost always too grainy to be straightforwardly legible and does not deliver the proof being asked of it. In many of the videos, annotated text and graphic highlighters provide further guidance about what we are being shown in an effort to narrow the epistemic gap between story and image. These IDF videos, with captions sometimes fanciful in their certainty, became the prototype for the videos recently released in the wake of the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla raid.

About the same time that the IDF created its YouTube channel to coincide with Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli Foreign Ministry had begun actively recruiting for its "Internet Warfare Team," whose paid members would pose as ordinary web surfers and post pro-Israel commentary and talking points on Twitter, Facebook, and in the blogosphere.[15] Other recruits uploaded thousands of "positive" pictures of Israel (desalination plants, solar panel farms, female IDF soldiers in bikinis, etc.) so that Google searches would be less likely to turn up images of occupation and devastation.[16] In 2007, Hasbara Fellowships[17] (cosponsored by the Foreign Ministry) began organizing "a team of Wikipedians to make sure Israel is presented fairly and accurately,"[18] and in 2010 the YESHA Council (representing the settler movement) joined in, offering courses in how to edit Wikipedia from a pro-Israel point of view.[19] The IDF has a blog and has begun tweeting.[20] The Israeli consulate in New York now holds "news conferences" via Twitter, attracting over 5,000 participants, whose questions elicit replies like this: "we R pro nego. crntly tlks r held w the PA + tlks on the 2 state soln. we talk only w/ ppl who accept R rt 2 live." This is a long way from Abba Eban, the *New York Times*

dryly observed, referring to Israel's suave ambassador to the United States and the United Nations in the 1950s, whose speeches left Henry Kissinger "transfixed by the speaker's virtuosity."[21]

If Israel's use of social media is eliciting sneers, part of the awkwardness surely stems from the programmatic, top-down use of an intrinsically grass-roots, improvisatory, bottom-up medium of expression. The Israeli Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs recently launched a Web site called Masbirim, gathering together information deemed useful to Israelis traveling abroad who find themselves "in discussions with locals during which they bring up misconceptions and false information regarding Israel, without our having the tools and the correct information for coping with the questions or the barbs of criticism."[22] The stated aim of the Web site is to provide users with information that will enable them to convince Israel's detractors of the errors of their ways. What hostile locals need to hear, it turns out, is that "Jerusalem is the most special city in the world," "Israel's economy is bigger than those of all its neighbors put together," "an Israeli invention for an electric hair removal device makes women happy all over the world," "Muslim terror takes place throughout the world with no connection to the Arab-Israeli conflict," "every fourth snack sold in Israel is Bamba, and 1,000 bags of Bamba are manufactured every minute," "The Middle East is known as a place where palm trees grow," and "Israel will not cease its efforts to return Gilad Shalit who was abducted by Hamas in 2006." Apparently at a loss as to how to direct Internet traffic to this goldmine of information, the ministry took out paid advertising in the bastion of Israeli old media, *Ha'Aretz*.[23]

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As the media landscape has shifted, so has the zeitgeist, and with it the popular iconography of the Israel-Palestine conflict. If a previous generation of U.S. idealists thrilled to Leon Uris' *Exodus*, to *Time* magazine photos of handsome Israeli soldiers "liberating" East Jerusalem and "unifying" the city,[24] their contemporary equivalents are unlikely to be stirred in the same way by an IDF-produced YouTube music video titled "Batallion 50 Rock the Hebron Casbah" showing soldiers in uniform cumbrously executing choreographed dance moves in the shuttered and empty streets of occupied Hebron after curfew. What meager visual wit is to be found in that clip has been lifted from a tour de force scene of choreographed IDF commandos in Elia Suleiman's 2002 film *Divine Intervention*, and as the soundtrack dissolves from the call to prayer to Ke$ha's electropop "Tik Tok," one could be forgiven for thinking that the vaunted Israeli spin machine really has lost control of its message and might indeed be better off collecting fun facts about snacks, palm trees, and hair removal than making music videos about the occupation. The IDF's upper brass evidently agreed, vowing to reprimand the soldier-producers and quickly removing the video.[25] But that, of course, is

not the way the Internet works; it was instantly reuploaded, garnering almost 3 million views (and counting) under its new title: "It's Easy to Laugh at the Occupation When You're the Oppressor (and a Douchebag)."[26] The Israeli authorities have been slow to learn that online borders are harder to patrol than physical ones.

What blogger Max Blumenthal thus calls "the IDF's hapless information war"[27] reached, by the lights of many, its nadir in the wake of the *Mavi Marmara*. Israel's decision to suppress all firsthand coverage of the raid by the traditional media (by confiscating the footage and photographs of everyone on board, detaining professional journalists along with political activists for days, and meanwhile editing the confiscated materials to create their own annotated and unattributed clips for public consumption) effectively moved the frontlines of the media war over the Gaza flotilla to YouTube, Twitter, and the blogosphere—home turf for activists.

As a direct result of "the proliferation of alternative forms of media (from networks who were on board to Twitter to handheld digital video cameras)," wrote Alia Malek, a Syrian American journalist and human rights lawyer, "the monopoly on the narrative that Israel has had when it comes to interpreting events in the region has begun to erode."[28] Photos released by the IDF were shown to have been misleadingly cropped or erroneously captioned, audio tracks were revealed to have been doctored or fabricated, IDF claims about al-Qaʾida connections were discredited and quietly retracted, autopsy reports were leaked confirming accounts of point-blank shootings of passengers.[29] Meanwhile photos and video smuggled off the ship and out of Israeli jails kept emerging, contradicting the official narrative timeline and showing "kidnapped" commandos receiving protection and humane medical treatment at the hands of doctors onboard.[30]

Israel's power to frame the conflict began "breaking down at an incredibly swift rate," wrote Adam Horowitz and Philip Weiss, the Mondoweiss bloggers, in the weeks after the attack on the flotilla. Weiss and Horowitz, like most commentators who hew to this narrative of breakdown, attribute it to a formal misapprehension of Web 2.0, an inability to recognize and adapt to its altered mechanisms of information dissemination and rhetorical persuasion. At their most sanguine and romantic, such commentators suggest that in a medium where the line between producing and consuming content has been blurred—where every reader is a fact-checker, and uploading a video is as easy as downloading one—the scripted talking points and hypnotic rhetoric of traditional propaganda cannot survive: "Who's going to believe 'a land without people, for a people without a land' when there are ten You-Tube videos to prove you wrong?"[31]

Weiss and Horowitz clearly share the view of many progressives of social media as an emancipatory technology bringing us asymptotically closer to Truth. Those on the other end of the political spectrum, naturally, are less likely to see social media in these terms. But they agree to a surprising extent that Israel's post-flotilla PR woes revolve centrally around a paradigm shift in

online media. "How did it happen?" the executive editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, Amir Mizroch, asked ruefully. "The Israeli government never bothered to read *Wired*," came his droll diagnosis, referring to the iconic technology magazine inspired by the "media ecology" theories of Marshall McLuhan. "Social media is cheap and is antithetical to centralized bodies and subverts their authority. It is, so far, proving to be one of the asymmetrical weapons of choice for grassroots activists," Mizroch concludes.[32]

Even in the more cautious formulations of academic writers, Web 2.0 in the present phase of the Israel-Palestine conflict is presented as potently and innately subversive. Concluding their wide-ranging survey of the subject, Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein (a sociologist and a cultural anthropologist, respectively) describe the "necessarily polyvocal nature of the conflict's digital field—a field that is constantly shifting and subject to political reinscription, belying Israeli state efforts to control its contours through the production of a single, visually verifiable truth."[33] If "truth" here cedes something of its singularity and definitiveness, the loss is offset by social media's gain; the latter acquires something like historical agency, even a kind of emancipatory force.

PHANTOM LEVELING

Activists should take heart from all of this, but in sober measure. It is very easy to overestimate the "leveling" effect of social media. Our visceral readiness to believe in this leveling stems at least in part from the phenomenological experience of absorbing content in the standardized fonts, layouts, and content presentation of YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, and a great many blogs. In an older media environment, the cheaper ink, rough paper, and lack of mainstream advertising in a publication like *Z* magazine, not to mention the difficulty of obtaining it in the first place, were cues to the very senses that what you held in your hands had something less than the reach of the *New York Times*. By contrast, watching flotilla clips uploaded to YouTube by the IDF's spokesperson's unit is experientially identical to watching the amateur clips debunking them: same corporate masthead, same navigation tools and loading times, same banner ads, same laptop screen.

But if the medium is thus democratized, and if "Israel has not found an effective response to this democratization,"[34] then why does the much-touted Cultures of Resistance video (consisting of raw footage smuggled off the *Mavi Marmara* by documentary filmmaker Iara Lee that contradicts the official Israeli narrative) have just under 300,000 views after four months on YouTube,[35] while the IDF's "Close-Up Footage of Mavi Marmara Passengers Attacking IDF Soldiers" attracted more than a million in its first week? If the Internet killed Israeli PR, why are views of the Minor Demographic Threat mashup outnumbered by "We Con the World"—inept and "tone-deaf" as the latter may be—at a ratio of more than one hundred to one?[36] The element of misplaced confidence here derives in part from conflating political

persuasion with pop-cultural momentum. Yes, Minor Demographic Threat is cooler (sharper, savvier, more innovative, and more at ease in the domain of social media, and closer to its pulse) than Caroline Glick's "Flotilla Choir" (cited as the maker of "We Con the World").[37] It may even be true more generally that pro-Palestinian media activists are cooler than seminar-trained "hasbara-bots."[38] Macs are cooler than PCs—not despite but *because* of their fractional market share: they are associated not with the corporate economy but with the writers, artists, and designers at the margins. But while 5–10 percent market share is enough to make Steve Jobs rich, it isn't enough to win a political information war.

To put the question differently: if, as Blumenthal argues, "Israel's most respected reporters lined up to serve as military stenographers, barely challenging the IDF's rapidly changing versions of events" in the wake of the *Mavi Marmara*, and if in turn the world media "still relies on Israeli journalism as a vital source of information," then just how hapless *was* this information war?[39] In the headiness of these still early days of Web 2.0, it is easy to forget that what we are looking at is not an autonomous or discrete "digital field," but rather a small—if, for the moment, brilliantly lit—stage, held in place by a slowly evolving, relatively durable infrastructure of news-gathering, propaganda, and persuasion.

Indeed Blumenthal's own post-flotilla work, invaluable as it is, neatly illustrates the conceptual problem in attributing a sea change in coverage of the conflict to the new media. He and an Israeli journalist from Real News (a member-supported indymedia network that "broadcasts" online) repeatedly and persistently contacted the IDF spokesperson's office to request evidence that (a) *Mavi Marmara* passengers had "ties with World Jihad Groups, mainly Al Qaeda"; (b) an ex-U.S. Marine onboard was headed to Gaza to train a Hamas commando unit; (c) a photo of a bearded passenger bearing his teeth and brandishing a scimitar was indeed taken after commandos boarded the ship and the melee began; and (d) an IDF-released recording featuring a strange voice, somewhere between Chico Marx's fake Latino accent and Cheech Marin's real one, telling IDF soldiers to "go back to Auschwitz" and explaining, in a bit of oddly expository dialogue, that "we're helping Arabs going against the U.S., don't forget 9/11, guys," allegedly broadcast by the *Marmara*'s radio in an exchange with an Israeli vessel, was authentic—all claims made by the IDF and repeated by *Ha'Aretz*, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, and other influential Israeli dailies.[40]

Blumenthal's questions were all pointed and excellent, and he succeeded in cornering IDF spokespeople, at least with regard to the first three questions, where the spokesperson's office had to admit there was no evidence. The response of the traditional media, however, shows the limited impact of even the most intrepid media activism on mainstream journalistic narratives. Thus, although subsequently the IDF press releases and *Ha'Aretz* photo captions were quietly altered, there was no explicit correction or retraction. The supposed al-Qaʿida members onboard were downgraded to "Attackers

of IDF Soldiers Found Without Identification Papers." Meanwhile the fellow with the grimace and the scimitar was revealed—through the combination of a blogpost by Electronic Intifada founder Ali Abunimah and a tweet by one of Blumenthal's readers—to have been Yemeni member of parliament Muhammad al-Hazmi. In fact, the Yemeni was seated in broad daylight, not crouching in the predawn; speaking to reporters, not baring his fangs at commandos; holding a traditional ceremonial sword and engaged in some sort of show-and-tell, not the thrust and parry of mortal combat.[41] The IDF photo (reproduced and credulously captioned by *Ha'Aretz*) had been cropped to obscure all of the above. *Ha'Aretz* revised their caption, while neither clarifying the context of the photo nor replacing it with the uncropped version.

With regard to Blumenthal's fourth question about the alleged radio transmission, the IDF continued to assert its authenticity. It acknowledged that the recording had been edited but maintained that it had been condensed only, not fabricated—and this despite the facts that it contradicted a previous version of the exchange released by the IDF and that it included the voice of Huwaida Arraf, a well-known Palestinian American activist acknowledged by all parties not even to have been aboard the *Marmara.* This was enough to raise the eyebrow of *New York Times* writer Robert Mackey, who devoted part of his daily blogposts for The Lede (one of the *New York Times*' blogs) to the recording. Mackey wrote with evident, if restrained, irony and skepticism about Israel's evolving claims, noting of the inflammatory transmissions that it was "impossible to verify their authenticity," and giving a gracious nod to Blumenthal.[42]

Blumenthal had described Mackey's coverage in The Lede as a breakthrough and relates the sequence of events in the following way: "Once the doctoring was exposed, the *New York Times* covered the episode in detail, directing international attention to the triumph of independent online reporting and the apparent failure of Israel's parochial press corps."[43] The gratitude, satisfaction, and rallying optimism here are earned and infectious, but what we don't learn from Blumenthal is that the *Times* "covered" this episode not in its news pages but in one of its blogs, tucked away on its Web site, not available in the print edition; a blog, moreover, mostly dedicated to meta-discussion of goings-on within the new media itself—the viral trends and ideological scrimmages rippling across other blogs, YouTube, Wikipedia, and Twitter.

Through this lens, in fact, Mackey has written a whole series of excellent posts on the flotilla aftermath, linking regularly to the work of independent journalists, bloggers, and social media activists like Blumenthal, Weiss, and Noam Sheizaf (the Israeli author of www.promisedlandblog.com). The content of Mackey's posts, however, has not migrated to the news pages of the *New York Times* nor, it would appear, to those of any other mainstream U.S. newspaper, which remain, in Blumenthal's sense, as

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"parochial" and aloof to the "triumphs" of social media as Israel's press corps. The Muhammad al-Dura footage may have pointed us in the direction our media environment was headed, but the irony is that if it were shot and distributed today, it might well fail to penetrate the news pages—except, perhaps, as a story about what's happening in the social media sphere, what people are twittering about, and so on, and meanwhile, back to the headlines. A proper accounting of the successes of social media, in short, has to distinguish between winning forensic arguments and controlling the news cycle, and this is precisely the distinction that celebrants of social media tend to elide. A previous generation of forensic activists—Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Norman Finkelstein, et al.—worked at the edges of academia. It is not clear that the reach of today's online activism is any less circumscribed. The mechanics of marginalization have changed; the fact of it has not.

MEDIUM AND MESSAGE IN THE *LONGUE DURÉE*

As we pause to consider the new media landscape we find ourselves in, it is worth remembering that virtually *every* new wave of the Internet has been heralded as an incipient tsunami of democratization—until it crests, curls, and breaks gently on corporate shores. Back when online magazines were called E-zines, they were going to level the playing field between independent and mainstream journalism, but with the dust barely settled Slate and Salon had emerged as the form's commercial standard-bearers, its *Time* and *Newsweek*. Blogging had been set to erase the distinction between amateur and professional publishing, bringing an infinite variety of voices into a newly noisy and unprecedentedly "polyvocal" public sphere. Order and hierarchy have returned soon enough, however, and in the realm of politics the blogosphere, like previous incarnations of the commentariat, comprises perhaps a few dozen writers, most of them youngish and male, writing under this or that well-known masthead.

With the West's euphoric account of a "twitter revolution" in Iran in the summer of 2009, the yearning for political deliverance via technology was revitalized. According to the BBC, the protests "showed the power of new media to organise and publicise opposition in a controlled society."[44] The new media themselves are seen as having power and agency, even a politics—the latter seen, predictably enough, as progressive. "It's obvious that connected people are empowered people. . . . The most spectacular example of Internet empowerment at the moment is in Iran," wrote a prominent technology columnist at *PC* magazine.[45] "Twitter and other social media outlets have become the soft weapons of democracy," wrote a former national security advisor under George W. Bush, who went on eccentrically to suggest that Twitter itself should be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize.[46] This vision of Twitter as a revolutionary power unleashed has carried over into coverage of the *Mavi Marmara*. "The asymmetry in money spent and effect achieved between the two sides is staggering. Call it the # sign versus the $ sign," says Mizroch, the

Jerusalem Post editor, referring to the "hashtags" used in Twitter posts to create viral memes and make key words searchable.[47] "The flotilla organizers spent almost nothing and won the day."[48]

The Twitter wave may already have begun to crest and curl. If in the popular imagination Twitter connects the masses in ways that transcend existing power relations and capital, in the real world Twitter Inc. has announced intentions to sell "promoted tweets" and is projecting revenues in the billions by 2013. Sober revisionist histories are being written. The assessment of Iranian journalist Golnaz Esfandiari, writing in *Foreign Policy* magazine, is unambiguous: "there was no Twitter Revolution inside Iran." She argues that "good old-fashioned word of mouth was by far the most influential medium used" by protestors, that the twittering rage was mostly among Iranian expats and international observers, and that the marginal use of Twitter within Iran actually left a mixed legacy, with the government having appropriated the medium to its own purposes, disseminating rumors and panics.[49] Malcolm Gladwell makes a comparable argument in a recent piece called "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," in which he suggests that "the platforms of social media are built around weak ties" versus the strong ties of traditional activism, meaning that they cultivate participation and connectedness rather than motivation and commitment. Because of this, Gladwell concludes, Web 2.0 "makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact."[50]

Gladwell's skepticism is salutary. But in many ways his account is simply the inverted image of the romantic account of social media. Whereas the latter looks to communication technology as an emancipatory force, freeing us from enduring power asymmetries of the real world in a quasi-magical act of "leveling," Gladwell hearkens back to the feverish solidarity and mad commitment aroused and consolidated by flesh-and-blood confrontation with the brick-and-mortar world of power—at the lunch counters, sit-ins, and voter-registration drives of the civil rights movement, comparing all of this invidiously to the low-risk affiliations and armchair activism of you and your four hundred Facebook friends on Web 2.0. (Rather remarkably, Gladwell has nothing to say about the Freedom Flotilla, which has one foot on the platform of social media and the other on the deck of the *Mavi Marmara*, with Israeli bullets raining down from above.) Both accounts, however, assign too much historical agency and even a kind of stable ideological identity to forms of communication that are, ultimately, cultural products like any other. As such, their function and meaning are perpetually transformed by the culture that produces them, as even a cursory survey of media history over the past fifty years should tell us.

Whether we claim that Web 2.0 is "antithetical to centralized bodies and subverts their authority," as Mizroch suggests, or on the contrary that it is "not a natural enemy of the status quo" but in fact "well suited to making the existing social order more efficient," per Gladwell, we are playing a parlor game popularized by Marshall McLuhan. It should come as a bracing shock

to recall that the master himself described television as a "cool" medium, "unsuited to hot issues and sharply defined controversial topics," a medium that "rejects the sharp personality and favors the presentation of processes rather than products."[51] That was in 1964, four years after John F. Kennedy, having just won the presidential election against Richard Nixon, famously remarked that "It was TV more than anything else that turned the tide." Yet it was in the process of affirming and elaborating JFK's explanation that McLuhan developed the theory of television cited above. He maintained that the TV image, precisely because it is low resolution and information poor, creates active, engaged viewers, who, in turn, want an abstract, low-definition image on which to fasten their creative imaginations. Kennedy was perfect: According to McLuhan he "did not look like a rich man or like a politician. He could have been anything from a grocer or a professor to a football coach."[52] Nixon lost because his "sharp intense image" too crisply projected his power and authority.[53] "When the person presented *looks* classifiable, as Nixon did, the TV viewer has nothing to fill in."[54]

There are two things to say about this. One is that from our present vantage it sounds strange to the point of perversity, and this estrangement is telling. The phenomenological and ideological function of television in our lives has been so utterly transformed that when McLuhan says that "TV is above all a medium that demands a creatively participant response,"[55] the temptation is to think he must have been kidding. And yet, he wasn't, any more than today's messengers are kidding when they tell us that social media are leveling the political landscape. The second is that for his next presidential bid, in 1968, Nixon hired a dedicated McLuhanite to remake his television image in line with the analysis above, and he won.[56] No medium has an inherent ideological character; it will evolve, assimilate to power and capital, be assimilated by power and capital, transform; and anyone, regardless of ideology, can master it at any given time. If, as the *Financial Times* says, "Israel can no longer dictate the terms of debate,"[57] the shift is a result of any number of things, including but not limited to: the resilience and fortitude of Palestinians, the awakening conscience of Israelis, a shift in the perceived national interests of Americans, the doggedness of intellectual activists—whether their work is online or off—and the courage of physical ones. And yes, the Internet has played a role, providing openings. But the medium is not the message.

ENDNOTES

1. IDF spokesperson's unit, "Demonstrators Use Violence against Israeli Navy Soldiers Trying to Board the Ship," uploaded 31 May 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bU12KW-XyZE.

2. "Mashup" refers to the practice of editing short videos from multiple sources, usually for comic or parodic

purposes and uploaded for online consumption.

3. Minor Demographic Threat, "Internet Killed Israeli PR," uploaded 11 August 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ME_NpnH7jDc.

4. "Dancing Baby" (aka "Baby Cha-Cha") is one of the first known examples

of viral video, circulated by email in 1996.

5. *Hasbara* is a Hebrew word literally meaning "explanation." The word is used by the State of Israel, as well as by supporters and detractors, to refer to attempts to justify and explain Israeli policies abroad.

6. For instance, Herzl's head is grafted onto a waterskiing Arthur "The Fonz" Fonzarelli in footage from the infamous episode of *Happy Days* that sent the beloved show off the rails and into terminal decline—Zionism, that is, has finally "jumped the shark." Wikipedia defines "jumping the shark" as "an idiom used to describe the moment of downturn for a previously successful enterprise. The phrase was originally used to denote the point in a television program's history where the plot spins off into absurd storylines or unlikely characterizations." The phrase has now entered the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

7. LatmaTV, "Flotilla Choir Presents: We Con the World," uploaded 3 June 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOGG_osOoVg.

8. See Ben Hartman, "'We Con the World' Gets 1m. Hits," *Jerusalem Post*, 7 June 2010, http://www.jpost.com/Israel/Article.aspx?id=177679 and Rachel Shabi, "Israel Forced to Apologise for YouTube Spoof of Flotilla," *The Guardian,* 6 June 2010, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jun/06/israel-youtube-gaza-flotilla.

9. Adam Horowitz, "Internet Killed Israeli PR: An Interview with Minor Demographic Threat," Mondoweiss.net, 24 August 2010, http://mondoweiss.net/2010/08/internet-killed-israeli-pr-an-interview-with-minor-demographic-threat.html. Mondoweiss.net is an influential pro-Palestinian blog run by former *New York Observer* columnist Philip Weiss and journalist Adam Horowitz.

10. James Fallows, "Who Shot Mohammed al-Dura?" *Atlantic Monthly* 291, no. 5 (June 2003), http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2003/06/fallows.htm.

11. The statistics for adolescent casualties during the second intifada are of course very high, as are those for police brutality against African Americans during the 1980s. The fluke in each case

is that the event was captured on video with such clarity and even intimacy. With the profusion of cell phone cameras in the last few years, bystander videos of this kind are increasingly common.

12. Don Duncan, "Shooting Back, with Video," *International Herald Tribune*, 6 August 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/07/opinion/07iht-edduncan.html?_r=1.

13. Robert Mackey, "Blogging the Conflict on Jerusalem's Streets," The Lede, 22 September 2010, http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/22/blogging-the-conflict-on-jerusalems-streets/.

14. Associated Press and Ha'Aretz Service, "Watch: YouTube Pulls Some IDF Videos Showing Gaza Assault," *Ha'Aretz,* 31 December 2008, http://www.haaretz.com/news/watch-youtube-pulls-some-idf-videos-showing-gaza-assault-1.260588.

15. Jonathan Cook, "Team Twitter: Israel's Internet War," *Counterpunch*, 21 July 2009, http://www.counterpunch.org/cook07212009.html.

16. Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein, "Another War Zone: Social Media in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Middle East Report Online* (MERIP), September 2010, http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/steinINT.html.

17. Hasbara Fellowship is a New York–based organization that was founded by Aish HaTorah and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2001. The goal of the organization is to train students on North American university campuses to be effective pro-Israel activists; see www.israelactivism.com.

18. Hasbara Fellowships Newsletter, *IsraelActivism.com: The Official Website of Hasbara Fellowships*, 31 May 2007, http://web.archive.org/web/20070705211000/http://www.israelactivism.com/index.php?mode=newsletter.

19. Robert Mackey, "Wikipedia Editing for Zionists," *The Lede*, 20 August 2010, http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/20/wikipedia-editing-for-zionists/.

20. Raphael Minder and Ethan Bronner, "After Negotiations, Israel Emerges on Twitter," *New York Times,* 13 September 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/14/world/middleeast/14israel.html?_r=1. That the state had to purchase the username *@Israel* on Twitter from Spanish

pornographer Israel Meléndez occasioned a certain amount of drollery.

21. Noam Cohen, "The Toughest Q's Answered in the Briefest Tweets," *New York Times*, 3 January 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/weekinreview/04cohen.html?_r=2. For Kissinger's response to Eban, see Efraim Inbar, "Israel: The Shift from Self-Reliance," in *A Restless Mind: Essays in Honor of Amos Perlmutter*, ed. Benjamin Frankel (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 136.

22. See http://masbirim.gov.il/eng/.

23. See Adam Horowitz, "How Israel Views Its Public Relations Problem," *Mondoweiss*, 19 September 2010, http://mondoweiss.net/2010/09/how-israel-views-its-public-relations-problem.html.

24. Philip Weiss and Adam Horowitz point out that "it was the 1967 war that helped solidify Israel's image in the eyes of the world, and in particular of American Jewry, as the scrappy underdog beating the odds," and argue that in this sense Operation Cast Lead and the attack on the *Mavi Marmara* can be understood together as "Israel's anti-1967 moment." Adam Horowitz and Philip Weiss, "Israel's Anti-1967 Moment," in *Midnight on the Mavi Marmara: The Attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla and How It Changed the Course of the Israel/Palestine Conflict*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi (New York: OR Books, 2010), p. 104.

25. Anshel Pfeffer, "IDF Soldiers Face Penalty after Uploading Hebron Dance Video to YouTube," *Ha'Aretz*, 7 May 2010, http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/idf-soldiers-face-penalty-after-uploading-hebron-dance-video-to-YouTube-1.300205.

26. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIehtCNgvrQ.

27. Max Blumenthal, "The Israeli Media's Flotilla Fail," in *Midnight on the Mavi Marmara*, p. 189.

28. Alia Malek, "Something's Got to Give," in *Midnight on the Mavi Marmara*, p. 251.

29. United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the international fact-finding mission to investigate violations of international law, including international humanitarian and human rights law, resulting from the Israeli attacks on the flotilla of ships carrying humanitarian assistance," 22 September 2010.

30. See Robert Mackey, "Turkish Doctor Describes Treating Israeli Commandos during Raid," *The Lede*, 9 June 2010, http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/turkish-doctor-describes-treating-israeli-commandos-during-raid/ and "Photographs of Battered Israeli Commandos Show New Side of Raid," 7 June 2010, http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/photographs-of-battered-israeli-commandos-show-new-side-of-raid/. See also Iara Lee, "What Happened to Us Is Happening in Gaza," and Max Blumenthal, "The Israeli Media's Flotilla Fail," in *Midnight on the Mavi Marmara*.

31. Horowitz and Weiss, "Israel's Anti-1967 Moment," p. 106.

32. Amir Mizroch, "How *Free* Explains Israel's Flotilla FAIL," *Wired*, 2 June 2010, http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2010/06/how-free-explains-israels-flotilla-fiasco/.

33. Kuntsman and Stein, "Another War Zone."

34. Weiss and Horowitz, "Israel's Anti-1967 Moment," p. 106.

35. Cultures of Resistance, "Israeli Attack on the Mavi Marmara // Raw Footage," uploaded 11 June 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwsMJmvS0AY.

36. Adam Horowitz, "Internet Killed the Hasbara Star," *Mondoweiss*, 8 June 2010, http://mondoweiss.net/2010/06/internet-killed-the-hasbara-star.html.

37. Alan Dershowitz and Norman Finkelstein do not agree on much but they do appear to agree on this. In a lecture at the University of California, Los Angeles, to promote his 2003 *The Case for Israel*, Dershowitz quoted a student who told him "I'm afraid if I'm perceived as pro-Israel none of the young women will go out with me. It is not cool to be a Zionist. It is not cool to be pro-Israel. It is cool to be pro-Palestinian." Dershowitz went on to say that he wrote *The Case for Israel* because he decided that he "had to do whatever I could to help make it again be cool to support Israel." UCLA International Institute, "Alan Dershowitz Speaks on His *The Case for Israel*," http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=5071. Finkelstein points out that opposition to Israeli policies among university student groups "has spread beyond the Arab-Muslim core

toward the mainstream, whereas active support for Israel has shrunk to a fraction of the ethnic Jewish core," and notes that President Carter's "Palestine: Peace not Apartheid" speech at the historically Jewish Brandeis University received a standing ovation, and that half of the audience walked out as Dershowitz came forward to give his rebuttal. Norman Finkelstein, "Ever Fewer Hosannas," in *Midnight on the Mavi Marmara*, p. 256.

38. "Hasbara-bots" is a slang term for individuals trained—by the Foreign Ministry's "Internet Warfare Team," by Hasbara Fellowships, or similar organizations—to disseminate pro-Israeli propaganda in online comment threads, in university-lecture Q&A sessions, on Wikipedia, and so on.

39. Blumenthal "The Israeli Media's Flotilla Fail," pp. 186, 190.

40. Blumenthal "The Israeli Media's Flotilla Fail," pp. 186, 190.

41. Max Blumenthal, "Nailed Again: IDF Description of Suspicious Photo It Distributed Is Retracted," on *Max Blumenthal*, 8 June 2010, http://maxblumenthal.com/2010/06/nailed-again-under-pressure-idf-and-haaretz-retract-description-of-suspicious-idf-distributed-photo/.

42. Robert Mackey, "Photographs of Battered Israeli Commandos Show New Side of Raid."

43. Blumenthal, "The Israeli Media's Flotilla Fail," p. 188.

44. Jon Leyne, "How Iran's Political Battle Is Fought in Cyberspace," *BBC News*, 11 February 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8505645.stm.

45. Sascha Segan, "Learning from Iran's Twitter Revolution," *PC Magazine*, 18 June 2009, http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2348924,00.asp.

46. Mark Pfeifle, "A Nobel Peace Prize for Twitter?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 July 2009, http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2009/0706/p09s02-coop.html.

47. Hashtags are a community-driven convention for adding additional context and metadata to Twitter "tweets."

48. Mizroch, "How *Free* Explains Israel's Flotilla FAIL."

49. Golnaz Esfandiari, "Misreading Tehran: The Twitter Devolution," *Foreign Policy*, 7 June 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/07/the_twitter_revolution_that_wasnt?sms_ss=reddit. See also Mike Musgrove, "Twitter Is a Player in Iran's Drama," *Washington Post*, 16 June 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/16/AR2009061603391.html; in particular this: "'Twitter's impact inside Iran is zero,' said Mehdi Yahyanejad, manager of a Farsi-language news site based in Los Angeles. 'Here, there is lots of buzz, but once you look . . . you see most of it are Americans tweeting among themselves.'"

50. Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," *The New Yorker*, 4 October 2010, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell?currentPage=all#ixzz10p502ORy.

51. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 309.

52. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 331.

53. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 329.

54. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 330.

55. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 336.

56. Louis Menand, "Masters of the Matrix: Kennedy, Nixon, and the Culture of the Image," *The New Yorker*, 2 January 2004, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/01/05/040105crbo_books.

57. "Israel's Revealing Fury towards EU," *Financial Times*, 13 December 2009. Quoted in Norman Finkelstein, "Ever Fewer Hosannas," in *Midnight on the Mavi Marmara*, p. 256.