Social Media New and Old in the Al-’Arakeeb Conflict: A Case Study

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This article on the civic struggles of residents of the demolished Bedouin village of Al-’Arakeeb in Israel demonstrates how social media have helped marginalized communities acquire a voice. It is based on site visits to the village over the course of a year beginning in July 2010, and on interviews with residents, Bedouin and Jewish activists, and journalists covering the conflict. Media strategies of villagers and activists are described and analyzed, and use of new and old media by people with limited access to telecommunications infrastructure is explored. Subsequent news accounts of the struggle and the journalist interviews point to a multifaceted role social media play in progressive social change for the Bedouin.

Keywords activism, Bedouin, impact, Israel, social media

The Israeli–Bedouin are people of the desert who reside mainly in the Negev (or Naqab), the southern part of Israel (Marx 1974). Treated by the State of Israel as second-rate citizens (Marx 2008), within Palestinian–Israeli life they have acquired a unique ethno-regional identity (Yiftachel 1999) emanating from their history, lifestyle, and relations with the state. Major Bedouin groups have resided in the Negev since the early 19th century, documentation shows, and some even earlier, according to oral traditions (Bailey 1985). The annexation of the Negev by Israel following the 1948 War of Independence created chaos among the Bedouin, until then mostly undisturbed by Ottoman and British imperialists. Most either fled their homes or were deported, similar to the rest of the Palestinian population, while the 11,000 who stayed were subjected to military rule (until the mid 1960s) and concentrated into an area termed “the restricted area,” a fraction of the area that was their traditional home (Jakubowska 1992).

Since the 1970s, about half of the Bedouin have agreed to resettle in seven urban townships built for them by the state. The rest reside either in their original villages (if they are included within “the restricted area”) or in makeshift villages within “the restricted area” (if they were deported from their original dwelling) known today as “unrecognized” villages. Although the Bedouin are Israeli citizens, these villages are not connected to the national infrastructure and lack access to water, electricity, and telecommunications.

In 2008 a government-appointed committee headed by a retired Supreme Court Justice and former State Comptroller reported that 62,847 Negev Bedouin resided in “insufferable” conditions in the “unrecognized villages” (Goldberg 2008). Approximately 50,000 “illegal” structures already existed in Bedouin villages, according to the report, and another 1,500–2,000 were being erected annually. The committee advocated a comprehensive resolution...
of the land dispute between the state and the Bedouin, urging the government to recognize as many “unrecognized villages” as possible. The committee’s recommendations were never implemented.

Continuing pre-state trends and as a result of government land and settlement policies, the Bedouin transitioned from pastoral to urban and semi-urban life (Meir 1997)—a process that put an end to many of their centuries-old structures and traditions (Abu Saad 1995). Most striking was the loss of authority of the tribal and familial patriarchal formation (Meir and Ben David 1996). In the state’s formative years, the Bedouin had served in large numbers in the military, as they sought to integrate into Israeli society. More recently, however, they have been shoving aside their “Israeliness” in favor of a Palestinian and Islamic identity (Dinero 2004), reflecting a similar process among the Palestinian–Israelis (Hamami and Tamari 2001).

Unlike many aspects of the conflict between the Israeli government and the Bedouin over land in the Negev, the story of Al-’Arakeeb, the first village of its size—300 residents—to be demolished virtually overnight, has gained some, if limited, exposure in both Israeli and international media. Focusing on the case of Al-’Arakeeb, this article spotlights an act of resistance by a technologically inferior and isolated community that was enabled by the new capabilities offered by Internet and associated technologies.

Initial visits to Al-’Arakeeb in the year following its demolition were motivated by a desire to understand the plight of the villagers rather than by an intention to study their social media use. These visits led to the realization that social media, new and old, were prevalent in the demolished community and that their maintenance was a key activity of the villagers. In the process the following research questions emerged:

1. What role has social media played in the confrontation over Al-’Arakeeb?
2. What impact did social media have on the denizens of Al-’Arakeeb and on the Israeli mass media?

While we were conducting our research, the events of the “Arab Spring” unfolded, which gave additional import to our study, and we felt even more compelled to address our research questions.

Before proceeding further, at this point it is useful to define for the purposes of this study a very popular but often sloppily used term—social media—that is encountered a number of times in this article. The term “social media,” which has been popularized in recent years, is used to describe different things by different authors. In particular, “social media” has been conflated by many with the characteristic “user-generated content” (e.g., Agichtein et al. 2008) or with the technological development also known as “Web 2.0” (e.g., Kaplan 2010). The preoccupation with interactive capabilities of these technologies has prompted some commentators to go as far as stating that “[social media] have little to do with traditional information media use” (Correa 2010, 247). This conception is a very limiting one as it overlooks the commonalities between communication technologies both new and old, and the institutional underpinnings of the technical infrastructure that makes the deployment of these technologies possible.

In fact, all media are social in the sense that they all use “user-generated content” since they all operate within the public symbolic sphere to which all members of society contribute content and context, whether directly or indirectly. Even the fare of traditional mass media, which is often seen as unidirectional, can be perceived and interpreted in different ways by different members of its mass audience (Fiske 1986) and can thus be seen, at least by each individual consumer of media, as at least partially “user generated.”

We therefore define social media as communication technologies that enable the maintenance of the links between individuals and the personal and cultural networks to which they wish to belong. This definition encompasses “old” mass media such as radio and television, “old” interpersonal media such as the telephone, and contemporary “new” media, characterized as “mass self communications” by Castells (2007), such as mobile Internet. In effect, our definition differentiates between social networking applications (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and the like) and social media, which is a broader and richer term.

The rest of our article is organized as follows. In the following two sections we provide the historical context. In the next section we describe our fieldwork in Al-’Arakeeb. In the subsequent sections we share our findings and analysis. We end with our conclusions.

MEDIA AND POLITICAL PROTEST IN ISRAEL

Israel has evolved from its collectivist–socialist past (which lasted into the 1970s) into an individualist–neoliberal society, reflecting changes in the state’s institutional structure, its industrial infrastructure, the organization of its labor force, the distribution of wealth, the social welfare system, and the media (File 2006). The old-fashioned concept of statism was supplanted during this transition by a new form of centralization dictated by wealthy individuals and corporations and designed to benefit both them and the state (Yuran 2001).

On top of these political and ideological changes, by the mid 1990s the state had also changed its approach to civil society, moving from a policy of active inclusion of groups it considered in line with its ideological mission, through a policy of active exclusion and delegitimization...
of groups it considered challenging to its ethos, to a policy of passive exclusion and decreasing involvement with the civil society altogether (Yishai 1998). With the emergence of civil society groups that advocate cooperation between Israeli Jews and Israeli–Palestinians, the media chose to marginalize protest groups who were at cross purposes with the government, and to award attention to ones whose message was more “culturally resonant” with the hegemonic narrative (Lamarche 2009).

One tool employed by civil society to promote its agenda is protest—using political action to generate pressure that is external to institutional channels to influence government policy. Scholars trace its roots to a transition in political culture affected, among other factors, by the introduction of television, which exposed Israelis to protest movements worldwide and the role the media played in amplifying the voices of the protesters (Wolfsfeld 1988). Protest became a feature of Israeli politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Lehman-Wilzig 1992). One feature of the Israeli body politic is that protest is combined with conventional political activity not only by the middle class, as is prevalent in other countries, but also by disadvantaged groups in society (Azmon 1985).

The change in the Israeli political environment has also found expression in the structure of the media landscape. The party-affiliated and ideological print media, which had operated alongside a single government-controlled quasi-public broadcaster, gave way in the 1990s to a commercially dominated media landscape—both print and electronic. The advent of broadband Internet with the complementary mobile technologies enabled the rise of plurality of voices. However, as Caspi (2011) has observed, during the current “institutionalization stage” of the online media sphere, “the hegemony of old existing power centers is reproduced” (343).

For Arabic speakers, electronic media offerings in Israel had been dismal, if not nonexistent, for decades (Schjet 2008). What the print media were able to provide was not much more impressive. Only a single daily newspaper has served the Arabic-speaking population in Israel over time (Assaf 1961; Gilboa 2008). However, the Internet has spawned a marked change in media production, distribution, and consumption among the Palestinian–Israelis. There has been a proliferation of Arabic language outlets on the Internet. Although still markedly lower than levels achieved among Jewish Israelis1 an October 2010 poll among Palestinian–Israelis found that 67.5 percent access the Internet, while 55.3 percent do so on a daily basis.2 That compares to only 34 percent who listen daily to the radio. While Palestinian–Israelis comprise only 18 percent of Israel’s population, the leading Arabic-language website in Israel, PANET, is ranked fifth among Israeli websites accessed.3

THE STORY OF AL’ARAKEEB

Al’Arakeeb was established in 1906, according to locals who cite documentation obtained by their ancestors for their purchase of the land, and certainly no later than 1914 or 1915, when the community graveyard, perched on a barren hill less than two miles off Route 40 (the road that connects Be’er Sheva, the metropolitan center of the Negev, to the north of Israel), was inaugurated. The locals maintain that they had lived in the area consecutively up until Israel established its independence in 1948, and that they possess property tax receipts paid to the British Mandate from 1921 until 1947 and aerial photos that prove they cultivated 70 percent of the disputed land during this period, growing barley, wheat, figs, prickly cacti, and grapes.

In 1951 village residents were approached by the military commander of the area and told to relocate a few miles away. According to the shared oral history of the current residents of Al’Arakeeb, the villagers were promised they would be able to return to their homes within six months. However, the village was never officially resettled. The original families of the village dispersed and relocated to other “unrecognized” villages and the nearby township of Rahat, set up by the state in 1972. On the one hand, the Israeli Land Authority (ILA)—jointly supervised by the government and the Jewish National Fund (JFN; a quasi-governmental organization founded at the beginning of the 20th century to reclaim the land of Israel for the Jewish people)—has claimed the land as “state lands” over the years and has undertaken the required procedure of registering it as such. On the other hand, the villagers continued burying their dead in the cemetery.

Fearing that the forestation works undertaken by the state were a strategic move to make their return to their ancestral lands difficult, they returned in the late 1990s and established an “unrecognized” village, which by 2010 housed 300 residents. Upon resettling, the locals started cultivating the land again, to which the ILA responded by spraying their crops with chemicals between 2002 and 2004. Only a unanimous Supreme Court ruling, handed down in April 2007, blocked the state from continuing this practice, deemed in violation of the constitutional obligation to protect an individual’s honor and dignity (HCJ 2887/04).

In 2010 the JNF started planting a forest on nearby hills, which at least initially was funded by GOD-TV, a British tele-evangelist church, as attested to by a sign perched atop one of the barren hills at the time. Further south on route 40, another sign describes the site as the “Ambassadors’ Forest,” a project inaugurated with much fanfare in December 2005 by dozens of foreign ambassadors, the Israeli foreign minister, and the chairman of the JNF.
On July 27, 2010, the ILA descended on Al-’Arakeeb in the early morning hours. It was assisted by hundreds of police personnel, including special forces, some donning facemasks and carrying riot-control gear. The ILA said its bulldozers destroyed 46 buildings and uprooted 850 trees. In the process one woman and six men were detained.ILA forces, with police assistance, returned to the village more than 20 times since then, at first to complete demolition activities and later to demolish makeshift dwellings the villagers, assisted by civil society groups, had set up. In the following year, Al-’Arakeeb’s population declined, and in the winter, the village virtually disappeared. By late February, only a handful of villagers, among them families with children, remained in provisional dwellings erected within the fence of the cemetery, while on the opposite hill, where the village once stood, only skeletons of shelters were being rebuilt. These were inhabited only during the day, as an act of protest.

This was hardly the first time the ILA had bulldozed homes in an “unrecognized” Bedouin village, but it was probably the first time a demolition of such magnitude—the virtual destruction of a whole village of 300 people—was undertaken overnight. This destruction of the village was not ignored in the age of the Internet. Searching the term Al-’Arakeeb in English turns up countless references to what transpired in the form of news reports, editorials, blogs, audio, and video reports. Al-’Arakeeb has also become a key symbol for civil society groups in Israel. Indeed, during the International Human Rights Day march in Tel Aviv in December 2010, a group donning black t-shirts bearing the slogan “We are All Al-’Arakeeb” stood out in the crowd of marchers.

The attention focused on the fate of this tiny village, to which no roads lead and which cannot be spotted from the main road, did not go unnoticed by its demolishers and their collaborators. In January 2011 GOD-TV published a clarification on its website, stating that reports leading readers to believe that GOD-TV might be responsible for the displacement of Bedouin people in the Negev are false. The sign bearing GOD-TV’s name was removed. In July 2011 the ILA sued 34 of the villagers for alleged expenses incurred as a result of the recurring evacuations and demolitions. The NIS 1.8M (approximately $0.5M) suit notes that the defendants have been “assisted by organizations and by an active public relations campaign, in which the invaders had depicted the State as ‘oppressive and expelling’.”

FIELDWORK IN AL-’ARAKEEB

Interviews were held with members of three groups: residents of Al-’Arakeeb, social activists, and journalists. Two academic experts on Bedouin life were interviewed as well.

Face-to-face interviews were practically the only methodology a study of this type could employ, as a number of the interviewees were illiterate—residents of Al-’Arakeeb—and any form of written communications was impossible. This reliance on face-to-face interviews was in keeping with recent studies on information use among marginalized groups (e.g., Hersberger 2003; Hersberger, Murray, and Sokoloff 2006; Mignone and Henley 2009). Among other things, face-to-face interviews allow creation of human rapport (Opdenakker 2006), which in this case was used to gain trust of the interviewees.

The interviews with residents of Al-’Arakeeb and activists were conducted using the narrative interviewing technique, which takes the form of a conversation in which participants relate personal experiences, bringing into the conversation topics they consider relevant (Bates 2004). It allowed the interviewees to relay their experiences in their own idiom while providing their subjective meaning to the experience (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). This technique worked well with the journalists, since they are oriented toward gathering objective news, as opposed to expressing their own opinions.

Virtually all villagers who lived in Al-’Arakeeb after the demolition were interviewed, as well as the activists who frequented it during numerous visits of the researchers. Ten interviews with 14 people were taped and another six conversations (with four more people) were documented by note-taking due to technical reasons. All the interviews were conducted in Hebrew except one, which was simultaneously translated. Most interviews were conducted individually. Two sessions were conducted in groups of three to four participants. Two interviewees were interviewed more than once and additional informal conversations were held with others. Some interviews were conducted on the site of the demolished village, and as circumstances would have it some of them were coincidentally scheduled while demolitions were actually happening. Some of these interviews were rescheduled or cancelled, and some were stopped and resumed later. The villagers were aged 12 (accompanied by a parent serving as a translator) to 75 years, with a wide range in between. All activists but one were in their late 20s. All villagers except a 12-year old girl were male. The villagers’ education levels ranged from illiteracy to university graduates. The activists all held or at least were studying for graduate degrees. All interviewees were promised anonymity.

The journalists who agreed to be interviewed were among those who reported most frequently in local and
national media (print, broadcast, and online) about Al-
'Arakeeb. Five reporters were taped, one agreed only that
notes be taken, and one was interviewed by phone. All
activists but one were male and all reporters but one were
male. Purposeful sampling, even snowballing, was not
needed in this case, as the interviews covered all the rele-
vant Al-'Arakeebian population. Interviews providing ac-
counts on Bedouin history and culture were corroborated
with interviews conducted for another project in other “un-
recognized” villages and with interviews conducted with
two experts on Bedouin culture.

Information was also obtained from media reports per-
taining to specific events, such as demolitions, violent
confrontations with the authorities, and protest activities
initiated by either the villagers or their supporters.

The data gathered through interviews, site visits, and
media surveillance was then analyzed using qualitative
analysis methods (Glaser and Strauss 1967; McCracken
1988). The interview transcripts were read multiple times,
and notes were made on categories, relationships, and
assumptions (McCracken 1988) that were evident in the
responses. This process of open coding resulted in analytic
descriptions of the recurrent patterns and themes evident in
the transcripts (Warren and Karner 2005). Taken together,
the analyzed data painted a picture of the role social media
played in putting “unrecognized” Al-'Arakeeb and its 300
residents on the world stage.

MEDIA IN AL-'ARAKEEB

As an “unrecognized” village, Al-'Arakeeb has never been
connected to the national grid. Elders in Al-'Arakeeb and
other “unrecognized” villages recalled the time when tele-
vision was introduced to their communities. At that time,
communal viewing of television programs in Arabic in a
central tent was the norm, including the Egyptian movie
aired every Friday afternoon on Israeli television. These
elders also talked about how unschooled members of the
tribe feared the new technology. “I,” an Al-'Arakeebian
old-timer who remained in the village with his wife after
the demolitions, said he received his first TV set (and a
washing machine) when he still resided in Rahat and his
children were young. They were a gift from his Jewish
employer, who was shocked to see he did not own such
appliances and that his wife was doing the laundry with
her bare hands for the entire family of 13. He, too,
mentioned how people were at first scared by the TV. When
he moved back to Al-'Arakeeb, his children, who were
by then married with children of their own, purchased a
new TV for him, which he connected to a satellite dish. A
generator provided electricity every day from 5 p.m. until
6:30–7 a.m., and he would stay up until the wee morning
hours to watch “news and films” from Egypt, Saudi Ara-
bia, and Libya, “wherever there was.”

“S” spoke about a small black-and-white TV connected to
a car battery that served the village until 1999 when the
generator-powered “big television” connected to a satel-
lite dish was brought in. “We advanced in life, as they
say—a Bedouin, and he has a television.”

“I” and “S”’s use of the radio can be described as cyclic-
al. “S” wakes up at 4:55 a.m. every morning to pray and
then listen to the 5 a.m. news in Hebrew on Israeli public
radio. “Everyday I listen to the news,” he said, “maybe
I will hear about a good decision the State has made.”
At 6:30 a.m., he listens to Israeli radio news in Arabic.
After the Israeli news, he listens to news from Jordan,
Egypt, and the BBC service in Arabic. “First we have to
hear what is happening in our home and only then what
is happening at the neighbors.” “I” also listens every hour
on the hour to the news in Hebrew and on the half hour
to the news in Arabic. He is a critical consumer of news,
and finds the Hebrew Israeli radio the most reliable among
regional radio services: “In [the Israeli radio broadcast in]
Arabic they lie...in Hebrew they have a word, they don’t
lie...we used to listen to the news from Egypt but we don’t
believe the news from Egypt.” When he had a television in
Al-'Arakeeb, “I” watched news on Al-Jazeera, which he
praises for its journalistic integrity and reliability. Other
villagers expressed the same sentiment.

“M,” who never graduated high school, learned how
to speak Hebrew from watching TV as a child. “Until
you’re 15,” he said, “there is hardly any contact between
the Arab child and the Jews in the country...Some never
see a Jew at all and so he knows them from the news and
the movies.” Television also helped him learn about the
country and about the world. “To know what is happening
in Tel Aviv I don’t have to be in Tel Aviv...what happens
in the Knesset I see it at home...you grow up with the
whole world inside your tent.”

Sometime in 1974 or 1975, the government installed a
telephone in “I”’s home in Rahat. He used it to call home
when he was away working, and his family would call his
employer to see how he was doing. All this was “until
the mobile phone arrived. Like today.” He recalled that
his children bought him a mobile phone as early as 1985.
His contemporary “S” dated his purchase (also made by
his children) to 1987 or 1988. It is noteworthy that mobile
phones did not become a popular and widely affordable
device in Israel until 1995 (Cohen, Lemish, and Schejter
2008). “S” felt the need for a mobile phone because “we
saw it was worthwhile to have because if a person is sick or
hurt or if something happens we can call the family...the
friends...the doctor...the lawyer...anyone we want to
call.” “S” stressed the utility of the mobile phone because
it enabled him to get calls when work was available in
nearby Jewish villages.

Both “S” and “I” are illiterate. “I” demonstrated how his
children put their numbers on “speed dial” in his phone,
since he cannot read their names but can identify the numbers in order to contact each one. For him, the phone has remained a means for contacting family members, especially now that he resides on the ruins of Al-'Arakeeb and his married children are dispersed.

Access to the Internet, though, is tough for the old-timers, as it is for the rest of Al-'Arakeebians, since they lack infrastructure. According to all the interviewees, Internet service was available in the village prior to its demolition through 3G cellular modems because, as “Z” stated, “we came here so that the kids will not be deprived of anything.” The villagers saw providing their children with Internet access as a form of status building, “Z” explained. “When they ask our children [who are being schooled in nearby Rahat], we prepared them to answer. You live in Al-'Arakeeb and you have a computer? You have Internet? Yes, come visit me in my home... People from Rahat complain... my child wants to see whether his classmate is right or not. When my child tells his friend in school ‘I have Internet at home’ that is unacceptable. [He tells them] I have more freedom [because] in addition I have my horse and my goat and my donkey and he, the poor kid [from Rahat] has nothing. Four walls and a computer.” Indeed, village life is perceived as superior to life in the downtrodden urban townships to which the villagers were forced to move by the state.

“Z,” however, was initially reluctant to go online himself. “I didn’t like this instrument,” he said, “it didn’t enter my head.” More recently, he admitted, he began adopting all the new technologies because they allowed him “to communicate with people.” “I,” on the other hand, said he sees other qualities in the Internet (although he cannot access it himself, being illiterate). First, he said, the Internet is a tool for memory: “It’s like a book that you lay on the shelf and open when you want to see what you did 10 and 20 years ago.” Second, it is a means for time shifting: “It is better than TV or radio because you don’t watch when will the news arrive and see it then.” Third, it is a device that closes distances: “You see America, you see England.”

For “S” (illiterate as well), the Internet is an occasional source of news. “If someone has Internet [meaning, if someone has a laptop with a modem, as he pointed to a person in the tent] then I ask ‘What’s new?’ If there’s something important I say ‘Show me.’”

**SOCIAL MEDIA IN AL-'ARAKEEB 309**

Villagers, activists, and journalists differed in their accounts of the role social media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) played in Al-'Arakeeb from the beginning of the forestation initiative through the first demolition and to its aftermath. “W,” a villager active in Al-'Arakeeb’s citizens’ committee, described in detail how he managed the village’s networking effort using his iPhone. “I started with the simplest thing,” he said, “SMS. I created groups and I have them here... I bought an iPhone, and before this iPhone I had a phone called ‘Express 5000.’ And I have a computer and I have Facebook and I have a website... though it is not online yet.” On his phone he created groups. “One I call brothers, I have seven brothers; the second is members of Knnesset, another group is all of Al-’Arakeeb, that’s 92 people... ’Arakeeb’s committee is eight, journalists has 20 journalists to whom I send out regularly, supporters of ‘Arakeeb is 39, so I built groups. I wanted to and I was able over time to prove that text messaging [SMS] became the language.” “We built a radio on SMS waves,” “W” said. “You don’t have to listen [to the radio], you get an automatic update home... with time the Bedouin started using SMS and I am telling you before I did it, no one did it. No one had a distribution [network] like mine. I was told people call it “W”’s SMS revolution... there are moments like this when you feel you are building history.”

Text messaging does, however, seem contradictory to Bedouin culture, he noted. “We were embarrassed to send to someone that you don’t speak with [a message]. It is always preferable to speak to a person, from the position of Bedouin culture. You have to talk to the person, to mobilize him, to show him respect. But with time I found out that the Bedouin have changed and the Bedouin doesn’t have time and strength to talk to you... so I make it easier for him, easier for me... I asked him ‘do you care if I update you?’ and I added him to the list.”

“Z,” a fellow villager and member of the committee as well, uses “W” in order to notify others when he finds out about a looming demolition. He said he sends text messages to “W” as well as to one of the Jewish activists, “H,” and to others that he knows “have control” of yet bigger networks. He said he does not like calling them, afraid they might be in a bad mood or not prepared for his phone call, and that knowing that they can control when to read the message makes it a more appropriate way to communicate. The text message, however, may have lost its appeal for some of them. “W” noted that some of his group members have asked to be removed from his list.

“W”’s Facebook page was inspired by events in neighboring Arab countries. “I used to lecture and to call our youth that does nothing ‘Facebook kids’ as a derogatory term... then I used the same words as a compliment... If the Facebook kids of Tunis were able to overthrow their dictator... and then in Egypt, then we can with Facebook wake up our youth and wake up the country.”

“M,” the villager who never graduated high school, walks around the village with his small netbook. “I am trying lately to pass what is happening here to the outside,” he said. He launched a Facebook page called...
The main tool used by the activists for contacting the press and communicating among the different activist groups is electronic mail. The mailing lists are organized by the interest areas of the targeted journalists: Hebrew press and Arabic press; Israeli press and foreign press; local outlets and national outlets; local media reporters and national political correspondents; and so on. The role they began to assume was that of mediators, balancing their allegiance to the villagers and the need to set the media agenda. In their media releases, they made efforts to include quotes from the villagers. Their key challenge was gaining access to all the relevant channels of distribution, both in Israel and abroad. As a result, after shunning Twitter, a social network that has not gained much ground in Israel, for most of the year, they started using it to keep the foreign press, the diplomatic corps, and supporting foundations abreast of events in Al-'Arakeeb, in English. One activist group also tried to publish a blog called “Words from the Graveyard Prison,” which carried the message of Al-'Arakeeb’s leader, Sheikh Sayah. It was published once, but as one activist explained, it was a one-time effort because “we put together all our power to write one thing, and that’s it.” Other activists (and not villagers) have blogged about Al-'Arakeeb occasionally.

As the demolitions continued and Al-'Arakeeb remained a focus of activist attention, the activists also took advantage of social networking applications over the Internet, but most of their Internet activities were internal. Just like “M”’s “We are All Al-'Arakeeb,” the external activists’ Facebook pages are all “friends” of one another. Indeed, the activist “O,” who was active in other left-wing groups, acknowledged that he became aware of the demolitions at Al-'Arakeeb while watching a video posted on Facebook and decided it was a cause he needed to support.

The activists’ social networking online is typically characterized by a combination of haphazardness and devotion. Some make sure new materials they believe relevant to the cause are uploaded to the relevant Facebook pages, although there doesn’t seem to be a system to the process. As “O” noted, the strategic goal may be to broaden the circle of people who share his values and to spur them to take action as well, but ultimately, the material only reaches the friends in his own circle. Low impact notwithstanding, the Facebook pages of Israeli left-wing activists—the type that support Al-'Arakeeb’s cause—were subject to attacks by their ideological opponents from the right. Lacking knowledge of the subtle rules that govern Facebook, the activists used the type of “page” reserved for individuals instead of the type of “page” that should be used by groups. A complaint to Facebook led to the removal of a
large number of “leftist” Facebook pages and required the rebuilding of their networks (Krupsky 2011).

Perhaps the most “old media” of all social media initiatives introduced at the village is a photography course for children, started by one of the Jewish activist groups. Indeed, the camera has become a popular tool in Al-'Arakeeb. Almost every activist and journalist attending a demolition or a demonstration seems to carry one. As “O” testified, he takes a camera anywhere he goes, even though his photos are not always worth sharing. Provision of cameras to youngsters served a range of goals—from enabling them to have a creative experience during their school vacations to giving them an opportunity to document their lives. Twelve-year-old “F” has taken a few albums full of photos, which several of her older relatives share with visitors to the village. “I photo the homes when they are here when being wrecked and after being wrecked... the photo is the big testifier,” she said. “It is the one that tells the truth, let’s us see the truth... I take photos to send to the world so they will see how they destroy [what is] ours and how they beat us up.” Four of the children also presented their photos in London under the auspices of Amnesty International.

**AL-'ARAKEEB'S CIVIL STRUGGLE AND THE MAINSTREAM PRESS**

Many webpages from Israel and many more from other countries—including sites of activists worldwide who have embraced the cause but probably never set foot in the village—mention Al-'Arakeeb. The number of videos on You Tube is endless. The most viewed, more than 18,000 times, is a CNN report that was uploaded and is maintained on the channel of an American activist who titled it: “Israel leaves 200 children in the desert with No food No water and No shelter.”

Stories about Al-'Arakeeb appeared in leading news outlets worldwide, including CNN, BBC, Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, and the Guardian.

All the Israeli reporters covering the southern part of the country who were interviewed for this study had heard about Al-'Arakeeb before its demolition in July 2010. Some have been following Bedouin issues for a long time; others were briefed by the JNF in advance of the forestation effort, and others covered related land disputes, which had brought them to Al-'Arakeeb in the past. One veteran reporter recalled writing about Al-'Arakeeb as part of an investigative piece on the preparedness of Bedouin villages for missile attacks from the Gaza Strip. The first Grad missile fired at Be’er Sheva landed near Al-'Arakeeb, he noted. Needless to say, the village has no shelters to protect the residents during such attacks.

Once the forestation project began in full force, the activists organized a major protest march, which took place in central Tel Aviv on May 12, 2010. All major media outlets were invited to the event, in which roughly 500 people participated, according to the organizers. The march was never covered in any of the print media and was only mentioned on Israel Defense Forces Radio in a talk show the next day. On August 17, 2010, after three major demolitions, Israeli author and peace activist Amoz Oz visited Al-'Arakeeb and told the locals that “the Negev is home to both the Bedouin and the Jews.” The media was invited to this event, but with very short notice; it was reported on widely though in the Hebrew online press, accompanied by photos of Oz among the villagers. The only print medium to cover the story was the broadsheet daily Haaretz, Israel’s newspaper of record and the only broadsheet.

The July 27, 2010 demolition took place in between these two orchestrated events. All local reporters were briefed in advance, some by the activists, some by the police, and some by the ILA. All attended the demolition, which was reported on by all major online outlets. As far as the print media are concerned, Haaretz carried a report on page 6 under the headline “1,500 Policemen secured demolition of tens of Bedouin structures in the Negev,” quoting reactions of the villagers, activists and politicians who support them over eight paragraphs, while only the last paragraph carried the response of the ILA spokesman. Ma’ariv, the smallest of Israel’s three national tabloids, carried the story on page 24. Under the heading “The village was erased” was a single paragraph, eight and a-half lines long, which mentioned a court ruling against “Bedouin claims” and cited only the reactions of a villager and a supporting politician. The two other tabloids, Yedi’ot Aharonot and Israel Hayom, made no mention of the event whatsoever. A village of 300 people was erased overnight and Israel’s two most-read newspapers ignored the event altogether.

Subsequent demolitions were on occasion reported in Hebrew online press in Israel, and rarely in the traditional media. A February 16 demolition in which police used “rubber bullets” to disperse villagers was the top item on public radio’s popular midday news program. Not a word was mentioned in the print press. Similar usage of “rubber bullets” in the evacuation of an illegal Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank only a few weeks later was covered in all print media.

All the reporters said they were well aware of the text messages sent by villagers and activists. The veteran Bedouin journalists who live in Bedouin townships and work for national Arabic-language online outlets also received advance notice of demolitions from random individuals who noticed police forces or bulldozers on the main road leading to Al-'Arakeeb. They attended virtually all the demolitions. None of the reporters reporting for the Hebrew-language papers interviewed attended more than...
two or three demolitions. They acknowledged receiving text messages from the villagers and from many different activist organizations, but not from others. In general the Bedouin reporters take a different approach to Al-'Arakeeb than the Hebrew-language reporters. For “C,” a veteran Bedouin journalist, Al-'Arakeeb is a struggle over land, “over the future of families,” and thus “most interesting and most important.” As he phrased it: “A man being dragged out, and you’re watching. Many children carried out of a house and it is demolished. It was also very emotional when you write and photograph things that can be relevant to any person.” “B,” a Hebrew print-press reporter, did not think the Al-'Arakeeb conflict had a big impact “because it’s not a story with serious blood. It’s not Jews and Arabs fighting for the same piece of land because it is’s Arakeeb against the state.” “A,” a veteran Hebrew broadcast and online journalist felt “it is an uninteresting struggle.”

“N,” a Bedouin journalist, said it makes a big difference whether you sit in your newspaper office and “routinely refer to forces coming in and out” of the village or whether you are physically there when the demolition takes place, record reactions, take photos, and add “life” to the story. “U,” an Arab–Israeli activist, said he has found that Al-'Arakeeb’s story is more prominent in the Arabic press than in the Hebrew press. “I bet you there is not one Arab in Israel that doesn’t know where Al-'Arakeeb is,” he said. He also noted that while it is virtually impossible to get the mainstream Hebrew media to publish opinion pieces about Al-'Arakeeb by activists, it is no problem to get them published in any of the Arabic online and print outlets.

None of the journalists, neither Bedouin nor Jewish, are aware of or have actively sought any Al-'Arakeebian information online. “B” said he does not look at all for information online. “Facebook gives me a rash,” he said, adding that “I am exploding from e-mails… I don’t need this. I have my tools.” “L,” an online Hebrew-language journalist, said she approached the activists and requested that they provide her with materials she could post on her online national news site. “The materials they brought me weren’t great, but there was one video I got from them that I did use. You see in it… the police, trampling over an aging activist.” “A,” a Hebrew-language journalist, recalled the video “where someone is being trampled” as well. His local video news program uses these materials, but they edit them into their own reporting.

The activists said they felt they had a certain impact on the journalists and the journalists concurred. “A,” the journalist, said he had “started numbering [the demolitions] through the encouragement of the activists… we give this a certain character through counting the demolitions. It has some effect.” The Jews among the activists were convinced that one reason might be that the activists are Jews. The Arabs among them (not necessarily Bedouin) said they thought that as activists they simply are considered reliable. This perceived reliability and the image of the Bedouin as unreliable explain much of the effect of the case and its media coverage. “B” noted that “they lost in court in all their motions… I think that hurt the impact of the struggle.” “A” added that “the court has decided and they don’t accept the court decision. So it is a criminal case.” Neither of them is apparently aware that the court rulings referred to the construction of the homes and not to the ownership of the land, which is yet to be decided upon.

CONCLUSION

As an unrecognized village, Al-'Arakeeb’s disconnectedness from the national water, electricity, and telecommunications grid is a major component of the state’s effort to delegitimize the traditional Bedouin way of life. As this case study demonstrates, mobile and wireless technologies have enabled the rewriting of the rules to a certain extent. They have allowed ‘Arakeebians to overcome the concerted effort to marginalize them and take part—limited as it may be—in civic society. Batteries and generators brought electricity; broadcast technology brought radio and television; cellular technology, satellite television, and mobile Internet made “unrecognized” Al-'Arakeeb a member of the international community.

Among the new technologies, the most prevalent use was made of text messaging, a technology associated with social movements since the beginning of this century (Shirky 2011). While Facebook is said to have been an enabler of the mobilization for the “Arab Spring” (Stepanova 2011), a perception reinforced by Arab governments’ efforts toward shutting it off (Dunn 2011), it is hard to gauge what effect it had on Al-'Arakeeb’s visibility, notwithstanding the fact that both activists and villagers believed that it had helped spread the word. YouTube, which was seen as an “effective” tool for the dissemination of graphic images in the Egyptian revolution (Lim 2012), was not effective in getting images from the villagers to the mainstream press in Al-'Arakeeb, as the journalists testified that they did not access YouTube videos on their own. E-mailing video directly from the villagers to the journalists proved to be a more efficient way. Email was the activists’ medium of choice. Twitter, the activists found, was valuable for connecting to the foreign press, an assessment that resonates with similar observations in other countries by Morozov (2009), Murthy (2011), and Tahaghghi (2012), which have debunked popular attribution of “revolutionary” power to this particular Internet application. On the other hand, unlike in countries such as China (Hassid 2012) and Malaysia (Lim 2009), blogging did not play a significant role in the mobilization effort.
The story of Al-'Arakeeb must be viewed within the greater Israeli political landscape, the landscape of a democracy in which some of the communications channels are flawed or muted (Schejter 2009) and in which deep-seated social cleavages persist. The activists faced challenges conveying their message. First was the challenge of promoting a message of Jewish–Arab cooperation. As Lamarche’s (2009) and Yishai’s (1998) analyses reveal, the indifference of the Hebrew media to the plight of the Bedouin was thus to be expected. Similar to the neighboring nations’ protest movements of the period in which different types of media framed the events along disparate narratives and told “different tales” (Hamdy and Gomaa 2012), the Hebrew media, immersed in a commercial media culture, sought “blood” and violence, while the activists and the Bedouin media, serving a community need, sought compassion and solidarity. The Hebrew media could (or would) provide very little of the latter. In addition, the Hebrew print media demonstrated a basic distrust of the Bedouin and their message and indifference to their plight. It is hard to imagine a demolition of 46 homes in a Jewish town overnight going unnoticed or reported in the back pages of Israel’s major newspapers. Thus, while the protest in Al-'Arakeeb shows that in Israel marginalized minority populations are able to protest to advance their cause (Azmon 1985), it does not necessarily translate into media or public attention even when the protest is a joint Bedouin–Jewish effort.

In sum, the presence of Internet and associated technologies enabled Al-'Arakeeb to gain more attention than it would have received otherwise. While the value of the Internet for furthering the voice of the marginalized peoples like the Bedouin merits celebrating, it needs to be situated within its larger context. The reality is that the Bedouin use of the Internet was in keeping with use of earlier technologies.

To each technological development, the Bedouin gave meaning that was relevant to their needs. The telephone strengthened family ties and provided employment opportunities. The broadcast media became intertwined in the ongoing cycle of their lives, and helped them understand their position in the world. They developed a sense for differentiating between reliable news and propaganda—a much-needed skill in the Middle East. The mobile phone provided the isolated and disconnected Bedouin with needed connectivity, and later they used it as an organizing tool in their civic struggle. The Internet provides them with the ability to express themselves and reach people willing to hear about their plight. As the village-activist “W” phrased it: “The state wants us to battle on the lowest level of Maslow’s pyramid, survival, but the Internet allows us at the same time to also be on the highest level—that of self-expression.” The mobile Internet allowed for unprecedented levels of creativity, participation, and a sense of place in the world and of belonging.

NOTES

1. http://www.internet-2.org.il/%D7%90%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%98%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%99%D7%9D_%D7%94%D7%95%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9D/
5. Including different spellings: El Arakib, Al Arakib, Al Araqueeb, Al Araqeeg, Al Araque, and others.
8. Interviewees were randomly assigned letters to label them.
9. The Israeli parliament.
10. http://www.youtube.com/user/alaraqueb
11. www.livestream.com
12. israblog.nana10.co.il/blogread.asp?blog=710223
13. Some examples: http://hagada.org.il/2011/02/20/%D7%99%D7%94%D7%95%D7%93-%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%91-%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%94%D7%95%D7%93/
14. www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJJVWmBcDjU
15. See Rosenfeld (2010).
20. It is important to note that “W,” while a native of Al-'Arakeeb, holds advanced academic degrees.

REFERENCES


