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Chapter 6: At the Crossroad: Internet Cafes

> How cyberspace will affect us, is not directly inscribed into its technological properties: it rather hinges on the network of socio-symbolic relations (e.g., of power and domination), which always and already over-determine the way cyberspace affects us. - Slavoj Zizek (1998).

6.1 Introduction

More than any other setting, Internet Cafes (ICs)[161] represent the new spaces where the offline and online meet. Internet cafés in general, particularly those operating in extreme situations, capture important aspects of the interlock between virtual and everyday life practices. Internet access overcomes alienation and isolation for people facing colonial occupation or exile. Therefore, Palestinians *inside* (occupied territories) and *outside* (diaspora) are impacted by the internet and ICs. To dispersed Palestinian refugees outside—for whom 'trans-national mobility' is merely a catchy title (Chapter Two), the internet offers (at least) virtual mobility and a 'virtual escape' (Chapter Three) from their particular isolation. For the internally displaced and occupied people in Palestine, internet access overcomes isolation during curfews.[162] In these clearly politicized contexts, ICs lie at the intersection between politics, technology, and society.

In previous chapters I studied the relation between Palestinian online communities and their offline reality. In Chapter Four I analyzed the imagined Palestinian nation and (envisioned) state as mediated through the internet. Through an analysis of Palestinian websites in Chapter Five the online representations of collective identity and virtual imageries were illustrated. This chapter will build on these themes by studying internet practices as they are experienced offline by Palestinian internet users. This chapter is motivated by different questions: How is internet used in everyday Palestinian life—at home, in an internet café, during curfews? In what way does the internet enable the presence of otherwise absent participants in public spheres? How does internet use relate to collective notions of morality? Examining such on-the-ground practices will clarify how the internet is used because little is known about the underlying issues of internet use in everyday Palestinian life. And this will, in return, show how communities (within their social realities) affect the development of technology. Since the Palestinian context is highly politicized (and at times facing extreme challenges), we have to 'be there' (in the Palestinian towns, the refugee camps) to comprehensively examine the Palestinian context. And sometimes

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[161] I use the term internet café because it was the most commonly used during interviews. Some interviewees also used terms like Cyber Café or Net Café, as will be quoted in the references.

[162] For Palestinians "inside" this is also significant in terms of offering an alternative medium to communicate their suffering since the Palestinian narrative is excluded from mainstream media.

this means being literally in the streets during military invasions, as I experienced during fieldwork in Palestine in 2001/2002 when visiting secretly opened ICs.

At the outset of this study I showed that internet users are active both online (chat rooms, email, and cultural or political websites) and offline (meeting people face-to-face after online contact and sitting next to one another in an IC), sometimes creating new social or love relationships. While studying how internet use is practiced in public internet locations, the commercial internet cafés and internet centres of local NGOs turned out to be particularly interesting. This chapter will therefore focus on users/owners of different kinds of internet cafes. One of the larger outcomes of the study of these offline internet spaces is that ICs are *contested spaces*, especially in regards to women's participation. Gender became a striking prism through which to understand the disputed context of public internet spaces. They hark back to first 'coffee houses' known from literature about the (Habermasian) public sphere. My discussion about Internet Cafes in the different Palestinian settings resembles the critical discussions about public spheres in the sense that they are neither neutral nor completely closed.

It is significant to evaluate the social impact of these new online/offline spaces with regards to how they evoke moral or politically charged values; and to which formal/informal set of understanding IC users (and owners) refer to. This analysis will show that public internet spaces are not just *contested*, but that everyday internet utilization also manifests processes of change, reflecting *agency*. Two important examples of this kind of agency will be examined: public internet places that defy curfews by offering their services, and the formation of new friendships and love relationships via the internet. However, the first section will illustrate how ICs pulled Palestinians to the internet, and visa versa. The experiences I encountered in Palestine and Lebanon also led me to situate the different Palestinian settings and deconstruct the different faces of the internet in order to understand the transformation of ICs. The context of the intifada and a community-based perspective will be taken into account.

6.2 Deconstructing *The Internet*

> Sometimes it's funny to hear elderly people ask the kids "Did anyone call us on the *Antirnet* today?" – Shaker, Beirut, 2003.

ICs are dynamic spaces; they may transform, expand, or cease to exist due to different social/political/technologic factors. To understand these factors, it helps to demarcate the internet in terms of the sort of instrument and medium it represents. This approach is based on a study of the technological infrastructures at stake, and the way power/capital is implied in the different settings that shape internet use. I discussed the general political-economic context in Chapter Two, but it is also important to question how, in the different contexts, people are attracted to the internet.

At the time, novel advances strongly captured the enthusiasm and imagination of new internet users. Fifteen-year-old Shaker, who enthusiastically commented on these new developments in the above quote, describes this enthusiasm when he wondered if we were experiencing the revolutionary impact of ICT. People's first usage of the internet was mostly explained in relation to school, work, and projects at community centres. The need to stay in touch with new and old friends abroad was another commonly mentioned reason for getting to know the internet. Khuloud, a mother of two teenagers living in a Beirut refugee camp told me that she made an effort to know more about the internet when her friend in the camp was about to return to Canada: "Rebecca took me to the IC a few times to teach me how to use the internet so we could at least stay in touch by email". Similarly, 17-year-old Samah from the same camp uses the net to stay in touch with her family abroad. She sometimes takes her grandmother and mother to the IC to join in her chat sessions with her father or brother.

In Chapter Two I proposed that what we see is a *relative* revolution in the internet impact on Palestinians. I also stated that ICT structures still exhibit an inherent contradiction that comes to the fore when we examine internet politics/usage. While originally designed to assist the army and then introduced to the market as a new product of enormous capitalist profit, the internet had also become a counter-instrument. By understanding this contradiction and moving beyond utopian/dystopian visions of the internet, I called for a dialectic assessment of internet technology. The debate about the internet and the virtual public sphere helps to explain its interrelated opportunities and limitations. This can be conceptualized in several ways. Oldenburg (1999) positions public cafes at the heart of the community's social vitality, similar to how I regard the public internet cafés. Studying changes in urban geography, he shows that cafés represent important public places and argues that they are the "third places". People can gather in these new spaces for the pleasure of good company and lively conversation. Exploring how the intentions of IC owners and practices of IC users intertwine will unveil similarities/differences between the many ICs. It will, in other words, show that ICs are "technological social spaces" (Lægran & Stewart 2003). Moreover, rather than looking for the individual impact of these social spaces, a community approach is more adequate, if not necessary in a context marked by poverty, dense population collectives, and extended family households (in which producers and users are part of the same communities).

Community Based Internet

The positive impact of internet in the Middle East should not be exaggerated for two reasons. Firstly, the absences of ICT infrastructures in some (rural/remote) areas, together with illiteracy, poverty, language barriers, or political violence, are crucial factors. Secondly; internet communication shares important similarities with earlier developments in communication technology. The call for a dialectic approach towards the internet in Chapter One is particularly obvious in this section for it will help to

deconstruct the internet as a technologic instrument *and* investigate its social impact in society. While the grass-roots impact of the internet is a clear novelty, the social impact of the internet in terms of communication/access to information is not completely new. The (emancipating) impacts of earlier communication forms were defined by the availability of the telephone or the growing possibility for non-elite classes and women to enter educational institutes and learning read and write. Apart from this *continuing* evolution of communication technology, it should also be stressed that the internet is a *container* medium. The following account by Daoud Kuttab during an interview in Jordan in December 2003 illustrates the different/simultaneous characteristics of the internet:

> Amman-Net is online since 2000. It is just like any other fully equipped enterprise with reporters, presenters, and researchers. It is not allowed to have private radio in the Arab world. This is its power: a radio station that's doing something completely illegal in a legal way, a private radio using the internet to circumvent the laws. (…) And we are able to reach those without internet through satellite and radio stations in Palestine, which can also be heard in Jordan because of short distance/receiver. Radio stations in Palestine download our programs and broadcast them on FM. Examples are radio Bethlehem 2000, Radio Nablus, and Amwaz Ramallah. (…) The coverage and attention it has in Jordan is special because of its Palestinian population and relation to Palestine. Amman-Net is perhaps not of much interest for those inside Palestine because it is, in fact, a Jordanian local station. Amin-Net and Palestine-News are much more applicable [for a trans-national audience], with daily coverage from inside Palestine. These sites get the largest amount of hits via our site. The Arab press is free about news related to *other* countries, but not their own. Amin-net started in 1996 as one of the first sites in Arabic; it was censorship-free, offering a collection of newspapers and magazines from Arab countries. The language was the key; now it is also in English.

Daoud Kuttab's projects show the prospects of radio and newspapers via the internet and how the internet is distinguished by its multifunctional properties because it includes different media forms. Thus, as a community based instrument, the internet clearly differs from, for example, television vis-à-vis possibilities to produce their own/critical content.

While someone has the possibility to (independently) set-up a homepage or a blog, he or she would not be able to influence the mode of control for radio or television programs. On the other hand, a personal website will not reach the same audience of (mass) TV broadcasting. Although it is not a completely new communication and media form, the internet is a meta-medium (Kircher 2001), offering communication beyond the uni-directional patterns of traditional media.[163] The internet is thus a *multi-layered* technology in terms of content, space, and audience. With a single touch of the keyboard one can find religion as well as pornography, or

[163] In Hafez, Mass Media and Society in the Middle East, 2001:138.

the combination of different genres at the same time. The internet is profoundly immersed, including different types of communities and interactivity comes in online as well as offline forms: online contact in virtual (private/anonymous) spaces, and face-to-face contact in (public) internet cafes and centres. Interactivity is one of the major components aimed at by Palestinians working in the ICT sector, even more important for people separated by walls, barbwire, or laws. Marwan, a Palestinian web designer who works in Ramallah, elaborates on the necessity for Palestinians to have online interaction:

> We worked hard on www.alnakba.org because many deny our Nakba (1948 exodus). My mother was born in Lod [Tel Aviv] before she had to flee. Now we can find a lot of information about her village and history on this site. But it also became a popular website because of the guest book. Many in the diaspora have no opportunities to talk to each other, so we offer this technique to bridge the gap.

The value of the internet when mobility or physical contact is impossible cannot be overstated. During military curfews or general strikes, the ICs were over-crowded in Palestine. The refugees in the poor camps in Lebanon also told me they enjoyed going to the IC during power cuts because without electricity or television there's not much to do at home. When it is boring at home one can go to an IC. But school and work stimulated the general use of the new internet technologies as well. These socio-political circumstances, in combination with the multilayered/meta-medium characteristics of the internet, have increased IC visitors.

School projects and exam papers more often required access to a PC and the internet. In some cases teachers tell students to do online research and hand in a paper that is typed, printed, and sometimes even to include images. But not all children in the camp can fulfil this requirement, either because their families cannot afford up to 3000 LL (3$) for internet and printing, or because many young refugees did not know how to use Microsoft Office or the internet programs. While spending a day in an IC in Bourj al-Barajna camp, I noticed that an employee was looking for information and images of dolphins on Google. After inquiring about it I learned that she was helping a young costumer. She explained that she sometimes does research for the children because she feels sorry for them, and when time allows she trains them to do it themselves. I focus on this community perspective of the attractive properties of the internet in order to integrate bottom-up information in the general analyses the internet's effects. As argued in Chapter Two, this community perspective is also important when measuring penetration percentages.

I consider the IC the primary place to find out whether the internet is part of a particular larger community. The statistics of ISP subscriptions and private home connections are often used as indicators, but the IC offers an alternative grassroots context and adds an important level to the dominant analyses of internet penetration. This view shows a more complex/broader internet penetration than at first expected, giving a voice to people who often cannot afford internet access. In regards to

internet use from the community level, I recall many 'indirect' users (friends, extended family, and neighbours) using the same computer, or friends gathering in front of one or two computers to chat and surf in an IC. While I watched her chat and email with family members, Samah sat with her mother and grandmother in the IC. These examples of Palestinian communities utilizing the internet in ICs confirm that data on household/individual statistics do not serve as satisfactory measures.

The internet café also presents a more *fluid* understanding of cafes; sometimes the IC is an extension of the house or school. In several ICs the children came to play games in the morning as they had to wait for their school shift.[164] Some children come after school and stay until their siblings or mothers drag them home at night. According to many IC employees I interviewed, some parents actually find the IC convenient during the day: it is like a nursery where the children are entertained and watched over. Such places are usually noisy and indeed seem like a children's centre, but soon I noticed that an informal structure divides the day in an IC according to costumers' age and gender. The IC managers will send the children away around six or seven; then the atmosphere changes because it is time for the youth and adults that have returned from university or work to occupy the place. To understand this specific context and infrastructure of ICs better, I mapped the Palestinian settings in Chapter One. Here I will continue by mapping Palestinian ICs in the different Palestinian (refugee) settings.

Situating Internet Cafes

Although ICs are my focus here, Palestinians did not only connect to cyber space through ICs. There are also those who were able to access virtual communities in other settings. For those who could afford it, there was the alternative of having internet connection at home. Unlike the public atmosphere of cyber cafés and computer centres with their open chat rooms, free websites, and accessible mailing lists, the private spheres of individual home experiences were not accessible for ethnographic research in the same way. Nevertheless, I also interviewed Palestinians who could access the internet from their home setting.

At the time, not many people had home connection; according to interviews with ISPs I estimate the percentage of private/home access in 2001/2002 at somewhere between 3 and 5 per cent.[165] However, those who did access from home told me they specifically preferred to use the internet at home sphere because of privacy (nobody can see what one is viewing) and practicalities (all files are on the pc). Zen from Bethlehem and a student at Birzeit University experienced it as follows:

> I spend most of the time at my boyfriend's now to use the internet. If I would apply for telephone connection in my own house, it would only be

[164] Since the camps are over-populated and the classes are too big, schools have to divide students into morning and afternoon shifts.
[165] See Chapter Two for statistics/analyses of the main penetration rates in different settings.

> for the internet. The meaning of place and time changed for me; I am from Bethlehem, not far from Ramallah. I could normally visit my family. But now it's almost impossible with the curfews and closures. If I want to know how they are or if I need to assure them I'm ok, I email them. When they attacked and reoccupied Ramallah, I checked many websites and news sources on the net for information and pictures.

Without disregarding the importance of this specific example, ICs were the most significant ways to enter cyber space in the period 2001-2004 when internet connection at home was rare for reasons related to economy, infrastructure, and politics. Evidently, most people relied on internet cafés for socio-economic reasons, especially in refugee camps.

Tracing the development of ICs in an accurate way is generally problematic, and in Palestine and Palestinian refugee camps even more so. There are a variety of ways to map the internet cafes, like by focusing on audiences (refugees/lower/middleclass) or location (in/out of camp, in/out of Palestine). I will also look at different national settings (Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine), including the dynamics inside these countries (see Figures 9 and 10 for geographic and demographic insights to refugee communities). My earlier visits to Lebanese camps in 2002, and my returns in 2003/4, were eye opening vis-à-vis changing notions about the internet.

People sometimes talked in terms of *conservative* vs. *open* camps; Ein al-Hilwe was perceived as conservative and Shatila or Bourj Barajne in Beirut as more open minded. However, while the Beirut camps did not have internet cafes during my first visits in 2002, Ein al-Hilwe had started experimenting with internet usage. The presence of ICs related to different internal structures and larger power relations that the camps were subjected to. The differences related (partly) to the fact that refugee camps in the South and North of Lebanon were more impacted by the strong position of Hezbollah (South Lebanon) or Syria (North Lebanon); sometimes these camps were like a state-within-a-state. This was not the case in Beirut where the small size and Lebanese government (state power) tended to be more prevalent. Size and location of a camp matters: Bourj Shamali in the South is relatively smaller and more remote than Ein al-Hilwe, thus also more isolated and "closed" in terms of (social) control. Ein al-Hilwe, although also in the South of Lebanon, is much bigger and, more importantly, better connected to the city of Saida. Internet access in refugee camps is linked to easy availability in two ways: it is *inexpensive* and *nearby*.

The differences become bigger when comparing the attitude towards internet camps in the North and South of Lebanon with those in camps in Beirut. In Nahr al-Bared/Tripoli the introduction of the internet was a big issue, in Bourj al-Barajne/Beirut it was hardly so. And while Palestinians from camps in Beirut can walk to an IC in Cola, a busy and lively area, within 15 minutes (and thereby also save 1000-2000 LL for a taxi, equalling one hour for internet), Palestinians in other parts of Lebanon are more dependent on IC's *inside* the camp. The significant distance to Sour's centre from Bourj Shamali, or to Tripoli from Nahr al-Bared, is a particular problem for girls and younger women. We passed military checkpoints on the long

(offside) road from Sour to Bourj Shamali and were finally dropped of on a square in the camp. The group on the square stared at us as we stepped out of the taxi and walked in the direction of the home.

Thinking about a comfortable place to chat or email outside the camp is possible, but it requires planning, freedom of movement, and (thus) support of the family. Studying the process of internet development shows the ways in which different groups of people dealt with challenges. Although there is the possibility to go to an IC inside the camp, the question is if they also offer special women-only hours, or at least if women could feel comfortable there.

Internet familiarity happens in different ways and relates to the local (social/political) state of affairs. The changes between 2002 and 2004 in Nahr Bared were telling. Commercial competition and the prospect of making profit seemed to have more impact than moral frameworks, so while in 2002 a mixed-gender public place was prohibited as *haram* or *'aib* (disgrace), in 2004 mixed internet cafes were already common in many places. Some ICs were competing and offered extra services such as printing and scanning, web-cams, Net2Phone cards, or even a telephone *"Central"* (switchboard system). In fact, these telephone *centrals* were of great importance to normalize the presence of ICs inside the camps (Picture 20).

My introduction to Ein al-Hilwe refugee camp in 2002 was a confrontation with what I consider the *relative* revolutionary impact of the internet. I started a conversation with the owner while I waited for my friend's cousin to pick me up at a local phone shop. He explained how he started his business a few years before. I asked him what he thought of the fact that phoning from Lebanon to Palestine is impossible. As the situation in Palestine since the Intifada had dramatically worsened, the need for contact had probably intensified. He laughed and said, "Then you still don't know how creative Palestinians are"; he pointed at his computer, and said "We use the internet to call Palestine my dear". The low cost availability of telephone connection is a very important asset of the multi-layered internet as I noticed before. I still wasn't sure about it so the guy offered me to try it myself; within ten minutes I was on the phone with a friend in Jerusalem, and then another in Ramallah. My friend on the other side of the line was surprised as he asked twice "are you really in Lebanon? In Ein al-Hilwe?! Please-please send my greetings to the brothers and sisters in the camps". Lebanese law prohibits telephone connection between Lebanon and Palestine (Israel), but normal landlines for other use are also prohibited in Palestinian refugee camps.[166]

In Bourj al-Barajna, Akram understood this as well and invested his money to start a telephone central and IC. Since he already used one phone line for the (telephone) *Central*, he managed to get a second line through a friend outside the camp and also connected to the internet. He first brought his own computer and later added a second one; that is how he started an IC with just two computers. The *central* made a lot of difference to the users. Interesting is the intra-active connection in Bourj al-

[166] A Lebanese NGO in a Palestinian camp will get special permission.

Barajne (between houses inside the camp). People could connect to each other inside the camp via the main *central* switchboard. According to Akram: "A mother can call her married daughters for long chats, our complete football team is connected so they can plan their trainings via telephone, and people can call each other for less than the cost of mobile phones." Since the calls must go via the central in the IC, employees can also take messages. Another way to offer telephone connection in the IC was to use net2phone cards (10–25 US dollars). With a head phone and a mic, the client can call any local or international number when logged on to the system via the online card-code. This is an impressive phenomenon after five decades without telephone, fax, or other technological ways to communicate between camps.[167] The camps could now make local and international phone calls via the internet, for even lower prices than with official landlines. And importantly, as my own experience showed, it was possible to overcome the political rules of prohibition on communication with Israel/Occupied Territories.

Scanning, webcam, chat, and net phoning, were examples of the useful and practical solutions of ICs and internet use. It was interesting to discover how Sahar at *Sirhaan Net* IC managed to arrange a travel visa to the UAE for one of her clients. Normally it would have cost 30 dollars to send a copy of the ticket by DHL and at least a week to receive a reply; here the process took a few hours. She scanned and emailed the ticket, than waited for the email reply from the host in the UAE who needed a copy of the ticket to obtain an application form. When they received the application form by email, Sahar and her client filled in the form together. They then sent it back by email and it was practically done. I saw letters, application forms, and pictures being scanned and sent off in IC *Al Quds* in Wihdaat camp (Amman). Sometimes it was not even necessary to have an email address because people could also use that of the IC. And IC *Firaaz* in Wihdaat camp also had a fax machine. Such ICs—with faxing, scanning, and sending and receiving email/post, made them look like small local post offices. The multifunctional uses of ICs are important because it also introduces a diverse set of costumers to the internet and makes it a more acceptable place. This also means that new encounters and experiences through internet offer new possibilities; the internet became a valuable asset for the exiled, isolated, and immobile by allowing access to other places/peoples/resources. The outbreak of the Intifada and the occupation shaped the setting and development of ICs in Palestine in other ways.

Intifada Frames the Setting in Palestine

Besides big cities, ICs have been mushrooming in remote areas as well. In the OT, many people who work in Ramallah lived in the outskirts of the city. Some of the ICs in these areas were doing well because of the closures (army blockades preventing

[167] The introduction of the mobile phone was also a leap forward but the services in the camps are bad and the subscription relatively expensive.

people from leaving and entering their villages and cities), and especially because of the curfews. The demand for computer and internet services secured a certain income for these little ICs because many people had to continue their work after hours on a PC or needed the internet. Still, the Intifada eventually had a devastating impact on the smaller ICs, particularly those situated in the 'line of fire'. Thus, in spite of the success stories, clashes, curfews, and shootings hit the ICT sector as well. Israeli occupation soldiers often moved with their jeeps and tanks through the connecting by-pass roads. Some ICs gave up because they were continuously threatened and none of the losses/damages was ever compensated; when they stopped making any profit they ceased to function.

I asked one of these small ICs why they actually started in the middle of an Intifada, in an area on the military route for the IDF, knowing the uncertain consequences. But the owner's response seemed to confirm that the sieges and reoccupation took many Palestinians by surprise. According to Abu Samer of *A-Sadaqa* IC:

> Our IC started as a joke and became reality, and we did ok in the beginning. We didn't expect the situation to become like this. We don't have any hope or belief in the future left, we don't even know if we will live tomorrow. They killed children playing in the streets, so what about me? … We don't get any compensation from PA or Israel. We won't see a penny. I haven't seen green money [US dollar bills] since the Intifada started. Nobody cares.

The bigger/stronger ICs had a better chance and sometimes profited from the fact that "weaker" ICs had to close. Nevertheless, although they managed to run a successful IC, some eventually gave up as well. The army had either occupied their space (as military posts), or simply bombed it. That is also why the location of an IC is important in this context. Situated in the Lou` Loua building on Manara square, the *Al Carma* IC was occupied by the IDF during the West Bank invasions. In 2002, during the March siege, extreme military violence, meant to crush the uprising, disrupted everyday life. I visited the place right after the invasions and I could either enter through the door or the hole caused by explosives. "It doesn't matter anyway, and I can't offer you a seat either", said Hisham.

Pictures of the IC and its clients were spread all over the floor—like all the other things thrown around by the soldiers—and resonated of happy days. The interview took place in what use to be a large space on the top floor of a building on the main square, with a view of Ramallah. It was a mess, everywhere broken computer equipment and bricks (Picture 14). The garbage and a huge gap in the wall were cynically introduced by Hisham as the "new interior design". Despite the jokes, it seemed that the Intifada, which initially led to *Al Carma's* explosive growth of customers, eventually also caused its destruction by Israeli explosives. It is worth reproducing the interview at length because it provides an important sequence in the history of this IC. In Hisham's words:

> During the first siege [February 2002] I was trapped inside the office for one week because nobody was allowed to leave. I didn't want to cause a risk to my costumers so I closed the place, but stayed behind to protect it. Day and night I heard gunfire and explosions. We could see the clashes between soldiers and the resistance on the streets from the roof windows. At the second siege [March/April 2002] they managed to enter the city up to Manara and occupied our building. I was not here. They didn't use the door, they entered through the walls.
>
> They stayed for 23 days... The place was important for them as a military post because it overlooks the city from different angles. But there was no reason for them to do all of this. It seemed they enjoyed it. They threw my PC files and data equipment out of the windows and stole the software I had been developing. They stripped all my computers. When curfew was lifted for a few hours and people went out to buy food, the soldiers threw cans of urine at the people on the street from my window.
>
> When I managed to return after the siege I was shocked. To be honest I felt like a victim of rape. This is simply what I felt: a violation of my personal being and privacy while I was helpless. Everything was done deliberately. They filled the toilets with sand after they defecated and then clogged them. Before they left, they collected all their rubbish and filth and smeared it round the place, even their shit. An American reporter came for an interview but soon asked, "So, does this all make you feel like also becoming a suicide bomber?" I threw her out.

Hisham's direct experiences with the military (re)occupation of the West Bank also made me understand the difference between Gaza and the West Bank. Gaza towns and camps were not invaded by the army and did not endure West Bank types of curfews. This is mainly because IDF soldiers can't operate inside the dense areas of the many camps. Yet, what did determine the survival of the ICs in Gaza at the time was the economic devastation and extreme isolation (see Chapter Three).[168] Therefore, while public internet access/usage increased the process of empowerment and creativity, the context of oppression also led to disempowerment and destruction. These were the "different faces" of the internet. After having studied the internet as an instrument of change and community usage, I will study the transformation of ICs in the different settings. The internal and external differences will be further studied in the next section; I first describe the birth and transformation of ICs and then discuss them as challenging/contested spaces.

[168] Despite (and because of) the isolation and poverty, the city counted about 150 ICs in 2002.

6.3 Internet Cafés

> Long after the night has descended and the shops are closed, their shopkeepers gone home, and the sizzle of the city turned cold, a few neon lights begin to appear… they are de facto outlets for a sometimes bored and other times repressed youth who now spend hours playing computer games, browsing triple–X-sites, chatting, and discovering the world "out there" through a flat screen interaction with cyber reality. Daily Star[169]

When I was in the West Bank in 1998 for MA fieldwork, internet cafés were clearly an exception; internet users were mainly found at the university. But upon my return merely three years later in 2001, many buildings in the centre of Ramallah and Birzeit hosted internet cafes. One of these is *Future Net*. 27-year-old Ali started this new business with other family members when they returned from the Gulf. The café is situated in the centre of Ramallah, near Manara Square on the central and busy Rukab Street, where many of the clashes erupted. It was one of the most successful ICs in the West Bank. They opened their doors in the summer of 2001, 10 months after the Intifada broke out. Except for the foreigners (international students, journalists, volunteers, and employees at NGOs), the costumers were predominantly students and young professionals from Ramallah or surrounding towns. *Future Net* had 80 computers (of which 17 were used for games only in a separate space), and was even expanding with a coffee shop and internet 'family room'.[170]

ICs had to overcome difficult circumstances in the Palestinian Territories during the Intifada. While I waited in the IC for a planned interview, soldiers entered the street shooting percussion grenades (sound bombs) and tear gas. As suddenly as the soldiers invaded the streets, there was chaos in the IC. Clients were calmed down and asked to leave the IC before a sudden curfew was imposed and we would be trapped in the building, as had happened before with such incidents. It was a strange experience; just before the clashes, I had been impatient and bored waiting to start the interview. I stood by the windows of the IC and watched the soldiers as they came nearer and nearer to our building. Clashes on Manara Square turned into a cat & mouse of soldiers chasing after youth. The soldiers were criss-crossing in their jeeps while firing tear gas and aiming with rubber (steel coated) bullets. The streets were full of people doing their shopping and children coming from school. Mothers grabbed their children and ran off. This was the first time I saw the soldiers coming so close in the middle of the city; I was almost paralyzed while looking from the windows on the second floor, seeing how young guys tried to escape by running into alleys or hiding in buildings and shops. One part of me wanted to join everybody and run away, it just seemed the only thing that made sense. Another part of me was so appalled and wanted to join the people that were throwing stones at the jeeps.

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[169] *Lebanese young men seem seduced by the internet café* Daily Star, Garine Tcholakian, Jan. 2004.

[170] The family room refers to a space for (married) couples, or where parents with children could come to and feel comfortable.

I managed to interview the manager some time later and of course we talked about what had happened the day I was waiting to meet him for an interview. Ali shared his ideas of what happened during those moments:

> When curfew is lifted, this place is packed, people check the news or send emails about what happened and how they experienced it, sometimes to assure their family/friends elsewhere. People generally chat or email about what they endured with the soldiers and tanks rolling through their streets, or clashes between the youth and the army…like on that day when you came and the soldiers entered again. They were mainly provoking. People protested and threw tomatoes and stones at them. Everybody started to run and panicked because the soldiers were driving fast with their jeeps. Often people get injured or killed by their bullets in similar incidents. So shops were closing immediately and we also had to urge people to leave. Many people were still in the middle of their internet activities so they were angry, but we had no choice and asked them to stop.

Even with the devastated economy and dangerous circumstances like these, *Future Net* was a big success. Foreigners and journalists often used the place to write and sent reports because the speed and services were good, and the IC was located at the centre of the 'actions'. Journalists were often found in the ICs during the sieges and clashes. One of them was an Italian who, tragically, became well-known as the first foreign journalist to be killed in the Intifada.[171] Ali recalled: "The day before he was killed he was here all evening, until we closed. We all knew him as a nice guy."

It became clear that Palestinian settings are not the same. The social impact of the new public internet cafes on Palestinian communities is studied in the different Palestinian diasporic settings. Palestinian returnees played a crucial role 'outside' as well. Median, one of those Palestinian entrepreneurs in Jordan recalls how he started:

> It was a great means of communication with where you came from; many of us are spread around the world. I had brothers and sisters in five different places in the world. The phone was horribly bad, and very expensive. I experienced discrimination as a Palestinian wherever I was; in Kuwait they use to call us 'Humousy'…we would always hear 'education is your only weapon'.

Median returned to Jordan after the Gulf War because most of the Palestinians in Kuwait had a Jordanian passport. He described how long lines of people waited for an available computer in his IC. The regional developments and Jordan's relation with Israel affected internet usage in Jordan. With the post 9/11 escalations in the Middle East, this combination meant that Palestinian returnees, US/British army personnel, Arab businessmen, human right activists, and deported activists from Palestine were all in Amman. This amalgam of people boosted the internet use in ICs even more. Median said: "Iraqi refugees or Palestinian *hajjiyyat*

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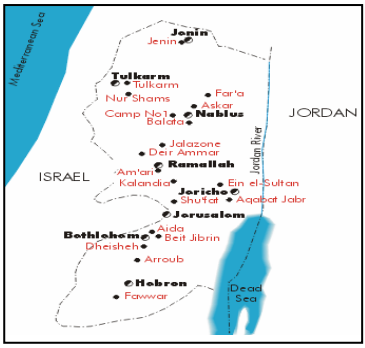
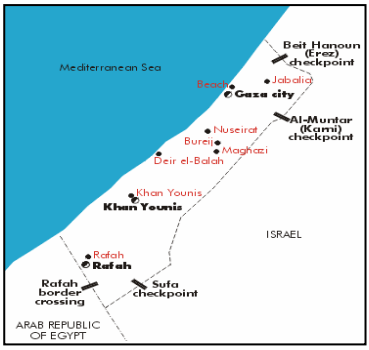
[171] Rafaelle Cirello was killed on 13/3/2002 near Manara Square, by Israeli snipers.

[older ladies] would also come without knowing what internet and computers actually are … so people who wouldn't have used it otherwise now do." In March/April 2002, when the conflict in Palestine was extremely escalated, the message board in the IC entrance was also used for political mobilization. However, announcements such as 'all Palestinian women meet outside American embassy' would sometimes be taken away: "That started worrying me; we knew the *mokhabarat* [secret police] did it", Median said.

Figure 9: Geography and Demography of fieldwork sites West Bank and Gaza



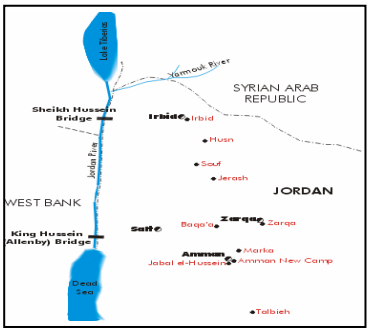
FIELDWORK SITE I



WEST BANK	
name of the camp	number of refugees
Aqabat jabr	6,264
Ein el-Sultan	1,828
Shu'fat	10,717
● **Am'ari**	**10,377**
Kalandia	10,759
Deir Ammar	2,335
● **Jalazone**	**10,966**
Fawwar	7,912
Arroub	10,246
● **Dheisheh**	**12,804**
Aida	4,715
Beit Jibrin	2,054
Far'a	7,540
Camp No.1	6,683
Askar	15,591
Balata	22,855
Tulkam	17,981
Nur Shams	8,998
Jenin	15,854
GAZA	
name of the camp	number of refugees
● **Jabalia**	**106,846**
Rafah	97,412
Beach	80,567
Nuseriat	58,727
● **Khan Younis**	**61,539**
Bureij	29,805
Maghazi	23,161
Deir el-Balah	20,215

Figure 10: Geography and Demography of fieldwork sites Jordan and Lebanon

FIELDWORK SITE II



JORDAN	
name of the camp	number of refugees
● **Baq'a**	**90,515**
● **Amman New Camp**	**50,609**
Marka	44,198
Jaba el-Hussein	29,520
● **Irbid**	**24,758**
Husn	21,441
Zarqa	18,335
Souf	19,429
Jerash	23,034
Talbieh	6,107

FIELDWORK SITE III

LEBONAN	
name of the camp	number of refugees
Mar Elieas	616
● **Burj el-Barajneh**	**15,718**
Dbayeh	4,025
● **Shatila**	**8,370**
● **Ein el-Hilweh**	**45,967**
Mieh Mieh	4,569
El-Buss	9,508
Rashidieh	29,361
● **Burj el-Shemali**	**19,074**
● **Nahr el-Bared**	**31,303**
Beddawi	15,947
Wavel	7,668
Dikwaneh & Nabatieh (destroyed camps)	16,518

As for the initial/*trial and error* phase such as Median experienced, the Jordanian development of internet cafes saw different phases. Several studies even claimed that at one point Jordan had a world record of the highest number of ICs in one street—located at Shafaik Street in Irbid across Yarmouk University counting 130 ICs. At the same time the mushrooming ICs were not regulated because there was no government policy. At the end of 2000, the Communication Organizing Authority issued a resolution to regulate ICs, requiring, for example, that entrepreneurs apply for a special license to open an IC. The IC owners would also have to register names of users and produce a monthly record of the browsed websites when this was asked for. The ICs were expected to install censorship programs and official regulations also stipulated that the internet computers be in an open space as opposed to the more private set-ups.[172] According to IC owners I interviewed, if the managers do not abide by these rules, undercover officers may visit an IC they find suspicious. The government later loosened these measures to encourage financial interest in the ICT sector.

Ultimately, it was the costumers and their reasons for coming that crucially determined an ICs success. I wish to go beyond the IC as a mere internet access point, and question what else happens in these places in everyday life. Aside from the technical availability of ICT infrastructures, the value and meanings ascribed to this medium also makes ICs relevant for study. After having established the different social/political Palestinian settings of this research, I now want to take a closer look at the different (infrastructural) possibilities of local IC initiators. Several transformations can be discerned: from a basic and mere *technical* offer to the IC as a *cool* space, and from a male dominated space to a mixed social setting.

Transformation of Internet Cafes

Despite of war, isolation, and lack of economic resources, ICs were still being set up within the available infrastructure. As one of the IC owners in Beirut said to me: "In the beginning the costumers used to wait outside the IC for a free spot, it was a new thing, especially because of the Intifada there was a huge incentive for people to come. The first thing many would ask when they came was, "Can I chat with Palestine?"

As I indicated before, everyone did not immediately embrace the internet. IC al-*Jaleel* was the only provider in Ein Hilwe camp in 2001/2. Its owner was also the only one who could offer internet distribution in homes. Our discussion on whether or not to allocate private internet connection was important in different ways. He told me that he encouraged people to use the internet because of its importance for political and professional empowerment. Although it was especially tempting to sell more internet connections, he initially showed restraint. This was related to the freedom of using it at home. According to al-*Jaleel's* owner:

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[172] Initiative for an Open Arab Internet (2006).

> I think we have to be careful because individual use of internet at home can be harmful. The internet has some negative characteristics and people might get seduced to certain of these elements. … We don't want to limit people's ideas or freedom, but sometimes we have to be careful and give some guidance.

When I met him again two years later and asked about the 'dilemmas' that he use to have, he was less heavy-hearted about the issue. As he did not maintain his monopoly of internet distribution because other ICs soon opened and even started offering private internet connection to homes, the question of what he thought became irrelevant. One of the reasons for these developments related to communication technology becoming more accessible. In the first phase internet access was only available via telephone lines, but later also through a cable/broadband connection, ADSL, and in some cases even satellite connection.

It was a confusing task to trace the way different ICs connected because internet connection infrastructures were illegal in the camp. There are different ways to obtain internet access and a 'friend of a friend', or a relative with a Lebanese ID would usually have to apply for a telephone/cable license. The internet connection (via telephone or cable) could then enter the camp from 'this friend's' home, just outside the camp. The wireless infrastructure requires costly equipment for refugee standards. A simple receiver costs 75-150 US Dollars. After connection is completed through a licensed ISP, anyone can illegally reconnect the connection and re-sell the connection to another IC. Nevertheless, it was an insecure method because it was always under threat of disconnected by Lebanese authorities when they discovered the illegal tapping from outside the camp. If the outside provider is also an illegal subscriber, which often happens, the authorities will disconnect him and thereby any other sub-subscriber. When the internet connection is tapped from a legal owner, it usually is not a problem.

Sometimes I passed an IC in Beirut camps several times without noticing it because it was a very small space, usually part of a house. The reason is that camps are overpopulated and construction is prohibited to Palestinians. The two ICs I studied in Shatila camp, *Scorpio Net* and *Shatila* Net, also offered a view from within with regards to how the young refugee entrepreneurs were motivated. The young men I interviewed in Shatila enthusiastically started their collective undertaking with a small amount of capital. They invested in the minimum costs of a phone line, a few computers, and a space that could function as the IC. Some of them already experimented with internet and computers at school. Nehad, one of the young guys I got to know, helped with almost all technical work in both ICs. In fact, most of the initial setup, connections, promotion, etc. was done by people that are often not officially trained or educated in the field. The owner of *Shatila Net* did not know much about computers or ICT so he involved friends and cousins to set it up with him and at first it was very primitive. Nehad built the computers from different old parts that he could get through his work. For *Scorpio Ne*t it was similar. In the words of 21-year-old Rafiq:

> I am actually a carpenter. There were no Cyber cafés in the camp and my father came with this idea. My cousins helped me because they had some experience and one even studied computer science. We used the ground floor of our house; first I had to make some modifications - door, tiles etc. When I first opened I only had games, I tried to get a phone line but I couldn't so I looked for someone outside the camp to give me a wireless connection. After two months the authorities found out and cut it, then I finally found someone with a legal line who could give me a connection. The authorities can't cut the line inside the camp IC because they have no control in our camps.

With the increase of internet connections, more cables were running through the camp (Picture 18). Each cable is connected to other cables, and a system of tapping forms a web of cables between the buildings. Some people get fed up and cut the lines that obstruct their power supply. Sometimes the local camp authorities cut them when safety becomes an issue. Since Shatila camp is one of the most densely populated camps it cannot absorb the many cable distributions. This structurally results in an average of 4 power cuts a day.[173] Alternatively, a good generator might last for 10 hours, but costs $1500, and a UPS box (Uninterrupted Power Supply) like *Inner Space* has in Bourj al-Barajna is also possible, but these options are affordable by only a few.

The two ICs I researched in Bourj al-Barajne camp in Beirut had different connection systems: *Sirhaan Net* used cable, and *Inner Space* telephone connection. Both ICs suffered from the usual power cuts, but were still better equipped because they had UPS and could generate up to 6 extra hours of power (Picture 17). Eventually, Akram, the owner, asks his costumers to go home in order to save the power. Sometimes they make exceptions for foreigners (journalists, researchers, or volunteers) that live in the camp. He explained, "The *Ajaneb* (foreigners) usually do work on the computer that benefits the camp. But if a Palestinian is working on an essay she would also be allowed to stay, and if the foreigner was just playing or chatting she would eventually be asked to leave as well."

Personal motives, in combination with new commercial prospects were often the reason why many ICs mushroomed. ICs that had extra capital could develop their IC and survive; but the smaller ICs, the ones that illegally tapped from cable connections, did not. Similar to the development of ICs in Palestine, some closed and some became video/game shops that are mostly visited by 7-12 year old boys. *Inner Space* began in 2000 as one of the first ICs in a Lebanese refugee camp; the start of his new business coincided with the outbreak of the Intifada. Political motives played an important role in speeding up the process of internet access in Bourj Barajne. Politics was a key factor for the initiators, as well as for the many new users; the hunger for information increased the turnout.

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[173] Power supply in Shatila was originally settled for 1000 KW for maximum 1000 families, but now the camp hosts 4500 houses and shops.

Key events in the Middle East, such as the Intifada and war against Iraq, compelled people to the internet. During fieldwork in Lebanon, news of Saddam Hussain's arrest created a new wave of political anxiety. Not only television programs gave full coverage -pictures, features, stories and conspiracies travelled back and forth on the internet too. People in the camp ICs were verifying the news, downloading pictures of Saddam Hussain being arrested and handcuffed, and discussed with each other what they read/saw.

In the South Lebanese camp Bourj al-Shamali, the three ICs depended on one internet provider, the Fatah affiliated *Al Karame* youth centre. *Karame* also provided internet to Rashidiye camp where the PLO Head Quarters and main Fatah offices are located. There was only one place in Bourj al-Shamali that offered internet access independent from *Karame*, the local NGO that hosted the aforementioned Across Borders Project. As more ICs opened business generally decreased, but they still made a difference, especially when taking into account the differences between the diasporic Palestinian settings. Class issues were, for example, present in terms of how the ICs transformed/survived.

In Jordan *Books@Café* (*Books*) saw several transformations. They went from mainly selling books to being the best IC to being a trendy coffee shop. Unlike many ICs I visited and discussed before, the place represented an urban hang-out space where boys and girls mixed. It could have been a Starbucks coffee shop. There was also more money to spend, as the price of one hour of internet was high: 2 Jordanian Dinar (more than 3 US Dollar), more than double the cost of ordinary Amman ICs and triple the cost of refugee camp ICs. This IC was clearly the hang out of Jordanian and Palestinian middleclass/elites. Median, the initiator of *Books*, was inspired by the ICs in the US where he worked before travelling back to Jordan. As the first one to open an IC in Amman, setting up *Books* was complicated. Since there was no 'bureaucratic wording' for ICs it was difficult to get a license. During an interview in 2003 he said:

> We labelled the place a "cultural centre" and had to be creative with the ministry of trade. The policy was partly 'go with the flow'. We were hot and flaunted by the media as the first IC in Jordan or even ME. (…)

Books was exemplary of an upper-middle class setting; it was a place where gays, alternatives, *argila*-smoking youth, and foreigners felt comfortable. *Books* didn't monitor its clients and the internet room, in a separate area of the café, provided more privacy. Walking around the different parts of this multifunctional internet café/coffee shop in Amman one constantly hears Arab-American accents. Alcohol is served, and the 'bar-style' interior creates a certain 'exclusive' atmosphere.

In 2003, a year after the first visits in 2002, it was the main coffee shop that attracted people, because while most people already had internet at home. And again a year later, in 2004, I saw many costumers bring their laptops because the place offered wireless connection, so the on and offline chatting could continue with a Latté (for

those who could afford the laptop and the Latté). The transformation of ICs is therefore also determined by the different audiences and their type of participation.

Besides interviewing initiators of ICs, I also talked with internet users about their (first) internet use in the IC. I heard different motives and experiences. Nuhad from Shatila camp in Beirut recalls how she started using the net: "Because everybody was talking about it I went to see the IC and what they were doing. I asked others to help me and started to chat as well, I really liked it." Safa' from Bourj al-Barajne camp heard about and experimented with the internet in order to contact her much missed family and friends from Canada:

> I would mostly email with my brother in Bourj al-Barajne or sister in Holland, I share everything with them. The best experience was when I went to the concert of [famous singer] Fadil Shaker. The concert finished at four in the morning, I managed to meet the singer and take pictures. I waited in the streets until the photo-lab opened and when I developed the pictures I went straight to the IC to scan and send them to every single person I knew!

Safa' knew that her chances to enter the IC and use the internet were related to the meaning of an IC in Canada and Lebanon at the time. And she told me that it was difficult in Bourj al-Barajna. But even between Bourj al-Barajne in Beirut and other camps in Lebanon there were differences. This makes it all the more clear that the IC is not a neutral public space. The presence of women in public space is often contested in Arab societies; consequently, women are also more subject to family/community control in smaller societies and less present in public places than men.

The exposure to new ideas and contacts with the outside world that the internet brings about is also relevant to potential change in ideas about gender and women's presence in new public spaces. The transformation of ICs should therefore also be understood in terms of how it hosts different groups of society. Contesting the implicit rules in ICs is a way to (re)gain access to public spaces. This reminded me of Median's first experiences when he opened *Books* and when he told me: "It was also used against me. Besides already being targetted for my own personality, I supposedly promoted sexuality….we had to fight for it." Thus internet access and participation sometimes needs to be challenged and negotiated; peoples' agency impacts these dynamic developments in different ways and according to different contexts.

Internet Café's as Contested Spaces

> Only a few young girls go to an IC because many feel uncomfortable. Sometimes men open porno sites, this is really very embarrassing. And somehow men think they can more easily get the girls who go to the IC".
>
> – Women's Union coordinator, al-Bekaa camp, Jordan, 2002.

The IC location and its interior, such as how the computer tables are set up, may encourage personal contact or offer anonymity. An extra lounge space in Ramallah's *Al Carma,* the separated computer 'islands' in *Chat Net*, the mirrors behind the screens in Ai al-Hilwe's *Al Jaleel* IC, the drinks & food in *Future Net*, music… all contributed to a sense of comfort or interactivity. While offering direct available (online) sources, the IC is also a physical meeting point.

This comfort was prevalent in several camp ICs; in one of these ICs boys and girls were surfing the internet for stories about the contestants of Arab Star Academy and showed their findings to each other or talked about what they were seeing on the PC screens. In another IC I saw a similar dynamic when youth were watching websites about Palestinian resistance fighters, the images of clashes with Israeli soldiers or pictures of glorified *shuhada'* [martyrs] seemed to have a special impact. Someone would, for example, say to the person at the next computer, "that is a cool picture, can you forward it to my email address too?" And yet in other ICs there were so-called 'computer islands': three computers on separate tables facing one another, giving the users their privacy and secrecy. Looking at the regular visitors and observing the different audiences, I could see that ICs were contributing to broadening the availability of public spaces. Sometimes that meant just changing the atmosphere and meeting new people (or reading the news in another environment) was important in the West Bank of 2002.

There are differences between an IC in a big/city (camp) and other (periphery) locations, as outlined in the previous section. Different kinds of people using the internet also assumes different forms of participation and experiences. The diversity in users of ICs is perhaps best pictured by the experiences in *Future Net*. As Ali illustrated during one of our interviews in 2002:

> We have different types of customers, some more exceptional than others, like that young guy. He looks like some Taliban sheikh. He doesn't email or surf on ordinary sites, but is just interested in Osama Bin Laden and Islamic websites. Today he came with a new CD-ROM about Chechnya and brought 5 people with him, all looking like him… Some people are strange, an older man who is for sure married and a father comes here to chat for hours with girls.

Although Ali is interested in what his costumers do and keeps an eye on 'proper' behaviour, the IC still provides a sense of anonymity/secrecy. The IC can thus also be a meeting point for political groups looking for ideological motivation through specific sites or software as his 'Taliban' example shows.

Access to these mixed public places was clearly related to class and gender divisions, but mainly the division between men and women. At the time, in many cases, men dominated the ICs. I was told that this is why the university districts of Gaza had two ICs for women only. During fieldwork in 2002, Sabri Saidam, Palestinian representative of ISOC in Gaza, explained:

> Gaza is probably one of the most conservative places in Palestine. Internet

> could be considered taboo at some stage, and Palestinian society is still a male dominated society. People in villages and deprived communities don't have confidence to send their daughters, but often also their sons, to internet cafés.

Saidam suggests that the IC offered different ways in which IC spaces could function. Possibilities to leave the camp or house and visit ICs depends on the specific girl and her surroundings, but also on the nature and reputation of the IC in question. Local values and rules are echoed in the wider structure of internet (café) access in a community. The fact that many ICs succeeded in establishing a positive image suggests that some ICs aimed at hosting a mixed and friendly place and stayed in good terms with parents, while other IC managers don't care or consider the policy of costumers only in relation to financial matters. The latter may contribute to the negative perceptions about ICs or limited female access.

I talked about this issue with young women in Lebanon's Nahr Bared camp in 2003 during a group interview. Our open conversations resulted in funny and sad stories about the double standard, and their secret internet escapades. The following stories could have been true for other ICs in Gaza or Jordan camps as well:

> Due to the morals of our society the girl doesn't have a chance to use the internet as she pleases because the men are exploiting the situation by sticking like glue on their chairs not making any space or time for a girl to use the internet in the IC.

Female costumers in ICs were not common in Palestinian camps, in fact young women faced many constraints and in some settings their presence was an exception. In several camps there were also young (unmarried) women who did not enjoy going to the IC in the camp and preferred to visit an IC outside the camp, usually when they already had to be in town for school, work, or other obligations. Some told their families about their IC visits, others didn't. Waleed, who runs an IC in Bourj Shamali camp, summarized the reasons in the following simple way: "The main problem is me. I am a 23 year old guy and the people around me here are also all men."

Despite this, many community workers or camp leaders I spoke with did not agree with the way women were treated. In Bourj Shamali Lebanon, PLO representative Abu Basel said: "The person who is afraid that his daughter will be influenced by the internet might just as well lock her in a room… it is not acceptable to ban using the internet or going to an internet café." Regardless of the importance of these statements made during interviews, the protection of girls by setting up ways for them to participate were more effective; theoretical analysis is not the same as providing practical alternatives.

Accessibility for women became an important issue when Palestinian NGOs in the Nahr al-Bared and Bourj al-Shamali camps had set-up internet centres as part of community projects. In addition, the number of conservative political-religious groups increased, especially among marginalized communities in the camps. Small sectarian groups had been causing problems in the camps. This had an impact on community projects involving men and women. NGO workers told me they were attacked

because of their mixed activities. For Baha (director of Beit Atfal Sumoud centre in Ein al-Hilwe), activities for women and youth that use to be acceptable, now constantly have to be negotiated and defended. Baha: "I can and I even want to resist the Lebanese and Israeli oppressors, but I can't accept this social oppression on us by the radicals inside the camp. For the first time in my life I feel like I want to leave the camp." A Palestinian activist in Ein al-Hilwe explained why the internet projects also related to power structures inside the camp: "Sometimes even the smallest group can make the loudest noise". With the rise of Islamist movements and a further deterioration of the general political-economic conditions in Lebanon, groups emerged (such as Usbat al-Ansar, Fath al-Islam, or Jama'at al-Nour) with even more sectarian views. They don't have the numerical power, but it is their manifested hard-line attitude that makes all the difference. Salah from Ajial Centre told me during the interview:

> We tried to open an internet project and then these so called 'representatives of god' came to threaten us. They are against mixed places and said that people will enter sex sites. These groups are a worrying phenomena. When my brother refused to remove posters of Che Guevara and George Habbash in his little centre, they tried to burn his place.

This situation was later substantiated by the news that militants detonated a bomb in an IC in Ein al-Hilwe.[174] The intersection between social issues and public space motivated me to look more into gender related issues and how they changed.

Parents and older brothers would more often allow girls and young women to go to places where smoking or access to porn sites was banned, or where separate spaces for men and women were offered. *Inner Space* in Bourj al-Barajne for example, created a more 'women friendly' space; it was considered a comfortable place and many girls and women trusted the manager. A young woman worked in the IC, and Akram also explained that: "As male employees we have a rule not to flirt, not too obviously at least [laughs], with female costumers. We certainly don't allow boys to bother the girls; they can talk to the girls but only if she wants"… "We don't want to loose our girls coming to the IC just because some guys want to watch these sites. Everybody should be able to use it". This example shows that women had better access to public ICs when they were 'protected'.

For the initiators of ABP it was a positive factor that the centres were co-educational and not excluding anyone according to gender; democracy and social change were part of the general inspirations when setting up this project. From the way the project operated in Gaza, I understood that such demands could not be

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[174] Fathi Mahmoud, Pumping an internet café in Al-Helwa camp, Al-Ahram Newspaper, 30 December 2004, pp. 8. In fact, similar incidents took place where militants referred to the IC as a place of corruption and immoral acts. See: Unidentified gunmen pump cyber café in Jabaliya, Palestine Press, http://www.palpress.ps/arabic/index.php?maa=ReadStory&ChannelID=51462 as visited on 10 October 2006 by Open Arab Internet researchers, see http://openarab.net/en/ for more on the subject.

imposed. For example, although the trainings were mixed, free access to internet was also offered at separate times or separate rooms for men and women. This was necessary for mobilizing female participation, and it did increase their presence. Sometime it needed one-on-one encouragement by staff members with parents to allow their daughters to join the project. The women's union in al-Bekaa camp introduced a 'women only' internet project and gave special internet training to girls to increase their attendance.

Another way to generate a more diverse public was to have female instructors and coordinators. They functioned as role models and promoted the project, at least within their own immediate family or friends. One of the encouraging factors that changed peoples' perception about the internet was the fact that school projects started to require the internet. Education offered a general justification to enter ICs and for accessing the internet for women/girls. From the many stories in Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon, I learned that internet use in ICs related to study or educational improvement (i.e. as oppose to just hanging around for pleasure). The girls were more supported. Going to an IC is easier for schoolgirls and for singles, but for married women it was sometimes considered a "waste of time because of her family and home responsibilities."

The IC had become a 'safe' public place for young women because it is not really a café (with reference to a 'bar') and therefore more acceptable. Nevertheless, several girls and women had to deal with discrimination, even if their families did not pose a problem. Hanane from Nahr al-Bared camp said: "My brother who now lives outside encouraged me to use the internet in order to stay in touch, but the guys here are stupid." At our group interview in Nahr al-Bared, the young women expressed their frustration. "Men are the ones with best access, they are privileged to use the internet. …We are fighting on all fronts because we are poor, refugees, and female." Saida, a friend of Hanane added: "You will not be spared if you fall victim to the *awlad al-shawari'* (street children)." A girl going to an IC was considered to be *'aib* and the gossip associated with it discouraged them even more. As Saida continued the discussion, Ibtisam, Hanane, and Fatima joined in:

> But lets not beautify things that are ugly and speak frankly: we are living in a really closed and strict society. Our traditions don't make any sense, they are weird. I mean, where does this bullshit come from, this is oppression. Ibtisam: of course we must be frank about these conservative mentalities and the oppression. But we must also explain why this is so. You must understand the conditions, especially the remote location of our camp. Being far away and not linked to a city is important for how they think. Many people of our camp also came from rural areas in Palestine, it is still part of their way of life. Hanane: They stick so much to their old and almost ancient traditions and habits. Fatima: But the consequences are directly and always for the women, so we can't accept it."

On the question what would happen if one if them decided to rebel and go to an IC, Fatima said: "For me it would be impossible, I'm not going to expose myself

to them. My parents don't have a problem if we go to university or to our work, or even to use the internet. But our reputation is still very important; the IC is just considered a 'bad place'." The special shifts for men and women didn't work in certain ICs because the young men did not respect the rules. As Rasha said earlier, they stuck to their seats.

That's why, at the time in Nahr al-Bared, many girls were only able to go the NGO that started special internet centres. They also went outside the camp to an IC in Tripoli, or to specifically women-only places or separated spaces. As Saida said: "I'd rather go to Tripoli: no eyes, no ears." But as described in early sections, a trip from the city to-and-from the camp is quite a mission. Sanaa, one of the costumers in the IC in Ein al-Hilwe referred to before, told me that the separate women's section in *Al Jaleel* makes her feel comfortable. The curtains that separate the two parts give here a feeling of security, but also a cover/legitimacy that made it more acceptable.

The objection to girls using the net is mostly the fear that they will establish contacts with men and eventually meet them offline as well. Parents sometimes told me that their daughters might "go to an IC and meet with boys". There was also suspicion that when the girl goes out on a blind date with an online contact she might be seduced during the follow-up face-to-face meeting. Although some of the fears might represent a general sense of loosing control over women, some objections are relevant. Several interviews with young men revealed that some of them pretend to be a girl to get in touch with girls, even sending them a fake picture. The guys then compete with others in getting and sharing information and details. Unsurprisingly, many of these guys have negative feelings towards their sisters using the net. The way I found out about this game was when I asked Mahmoud how many email accounts he has:

> One is the Hotmail, I use it with the name 'shy girl' and pretend to be a girl on msn. Just to make fun of friends, and make other guys on msn fall in love with me. Once I made a date with a guy. We chatted 3 o 4 days before I told him 'I'm in love with you and want to date you' and such things. So he said ok, 'where can we meet?' I made a date at the Arab University, I saw him waiting for me there! Sometimes they try to check by asking for a picture. But I have pictures my computer, I took them from a website with pictures of Lebanese girls, or got them from other girls on msn.

But the positive virtues of the internet: education, news from *dakhil* (inside/Palestine), contacting family abroad, were becoming legitimate reasons for girls to visit the IC.

The above shows that in many cases, the IC was a *contested* public space, specifically in terms of gender. Class distinctions are also a marker of the different ICs as I explained. Places where the middle and upper class youths gather, such as *Books* in Amman, seem to have other 'norms' and expectations. With these dynamics, new questions come to the fore regarding the social fabric of this new public sphere. The questions are similar to the effect original 'coffee houses' generated in terms of access

and participation in public spheres. The next section shows social differences related to ICs as contested places. The discussions will confirm that ICs are neither neutral nor exclusivist and resemble debates about the *public sphere, coffee house,* and *cafe*. As argued in the introduction, I understand Palestinian ICs in a similar way as Oldenburg (1999) looks at cafes as spaces in between: a 'third place', beyond home or work. I see the IC places both as public *and* private spheres.

6.4 The "Coffee House" Effect

> If it was possible to make a report about the human feelings that were present in this place, you would read a lot of sad stories, happy stories, love affairs, new friendships…In other words, many different human feelings developed, and perhaps ended here as well.
>
> – Hisham, *Al Carma* IC, Ramallah 2002.

Many types of internet users crossed each other during my visits to the different ICs. The words in the opening quote are a powerful summary of the impact of ICs in Palestine. Hisham's account resonates of the impression I had in other ICs as well. The internet café became an offline meeting place where people gathered, exchanged, and discussed news, waited, drank coffee or had a snack, almost like any coffee house.

Of course, the ramshackle internet cafés in Palestinian camps, crowded with young energetic Palestinians, is a far cry from Habermas's 19th century *coffee house* packed with the bourgeoisie. But in unexpected ways, they served similar functions. While cyberspace is the new online meeting space, the internet café became a new offline place. ICs are public spaces that may or may not fuse the different functions it potentially offers, i.e. work and leisure: ICs are more than physical spaces with tables and internet-wired PCs. Oldenburg's (1999) framework exhibits the same meanings that coloured Habermas's ideal type of public sphere. His model may help clarify how internet cafes overlap with, or differ from, traditional community cafes. Such spheres and places are not neutral and their impact is not one-dimensional. Habermas (and to a certain extent also Olderburg) reflects on important debates that account to the social relevance (and actual accessibility) of these public places. The configuring processes of ICs many encourage certain practices and discourage others. Lægran & Stewart (2003) speak of 'technosocial spaces' (:359). Their research on ICs in Scotland and Norway builds on theories inspired by the social shaping of technology and sees ICs as spaces where technology is translated into local contexts.

In several contexts I showed how ICs host different kinds of participants, which ascribe different meanings, alternatives, and opportunities to the internet. The above discussion about gender disparities signifies that internet spaces are not neutral/accessible to all. The public internet cafes are not liberal spaces free from class/gender/race bias: the IC is a place that needs *to be negotiated*. ICs and internet access have all kinds of expectations and ideas linked to them. These different faces of the internet can be seen as good for one and bad for the other. The everyday rules and

behaviours are attached to the different interpretations, and these formal and informal rules are often infused by moral ideas and ideologies.

The Good, the Bad, the Ugly (…and more Internet definitions)

> For Kuwaitis and other Muslims alike [sic] one of the problems of cyberspace is that it interrupts traditional systems for awarding authority and authenticity to public discourse. This concern, however, has not slowed Muslim uses of cyberspace. Some have even gone as far as to argue that cyberspace has created a form of Muslim renaissance (Wheeler 2003:12).

ICs develop/transform in various contexts and ways. I see internet spaces creating new social spaces *for* and *by* different publics. ICs provide leisure and may even strengthen social contact and face-to-face communication outside the home. People enjoy this type of alternative space with the sociability it offers, somehow like traditional coffee houses, as the café setting in Oldenburg's sense. These dynamics can be conceptualized by recalling the notion of the "coffee house" from the old *public sphere* concept in the new setting of the internet café.

ICs differ from public access points such as libraries and pubs, although as Lægran & Stewart (2003) pointed out, "Some cafes may fail to create a 'café' environment, while some community centres or libraries may succeed" (:307). Patterns of use and significance of access go beyond the technical question; ICs became the most common internet access points for Palestinian communities (especially refugees). An important factor that increased the popularity of ICs was the value of the internet as entertainment. Instead of waiting for their school shift or having nowhere to play in the overcrowded camps, bored children became experts in computer games. Beside the games there were also 'real' battles. One of the IC's in Im-Sharayet, a little town located between Ramallah and Jerusalem where my friend Rami lived, said the following about the use of his IC, *Asadaqa*: 'When they enter Israeli or American chat rooms it's like a war in the IC. They are so involved, they curse and fight on the internet…It comes from deep inside, it is what they really feel because they can do nothing else." Thus for a relatively 'closed' (and displaced/isolated) community, going to an internet café became a new kind of entertainment or escape (Chapter Three).

Internet users thus appreciated the social benefits of ICs and NGO-related internet centres. Visitors of these internet places often engage with each other's activities as they surf for websites related to news about sport, music, Palestinian prisoners and martyrs and they sometimes discuss the content. They are politically minded, but at the same time they engage in leisure activities when they play the latest combat games, listen to music, or surf for websites with trendy fashion or cars.

Wheeler's (2003) comment about the 'renaissance' in the above opening quote is appealing because it also assumes social change. Social change includes new

spaces to address the struggles related to ICs. Samah explained to me why the IC is more than what it may seem at first sight:

> My favourite place is here with Akram [Inner Space IC in Bourj Barajne camp]. I can ask him anything and it feels like home. The guys don't bother us because we all know each other. Sometimes I come and I find most of my friends, we sit and talk a bit, and than take a computer to check the internet.

Samah clarifies why ICs can be understood as *technosocial* spaces; the IC is embedded in different private/personal/offline ways. Samah from Bourj al-Barajne in Beirut does not face problems going to an IC and even used the net before it was introduced in the camp. One of the ICs in the suburb of Beirut used to be a meeting point of friends for many of the girls I met. In Bourj al-Barajne one can practically choose whether to stay in the camp, or go out to an IC a few blocks away. Several people who have this choice told me that for printing or only to check/send a specific mail they just stay inside, but for working, meeting friends, sending long or private emails, they sometimes prefer to go to a quiet or comfortable IC outside the camp.

The encounters in the ICs also led to the usual vibes and eye contact between boys and girls. 16-year-old Hiba from Bourj Barajne told me that a guy asked which IC she usually goes to. "He came to meet me while I was there trying to open an email account for my aunt. We didn't talk too much, but we did exchange emails. When we met online he said he loves me, I explained I just wanted to be friends." It is not commonly accepted that dates meet in an IC, especially if it is too obvious. Sahar, manager of *Sirhaan Net,* told me clearly irritated, "Once this couple entered my IC because they agreed to meet there. I refused for my shops' reputation. I told them 'you meet outside, and if you want to use the internet you are welcome."' She recalled another incident: a mother came with her daughter to the IC because they heard about a woman who married after meeting someone on the internet. "She sat beside her daughter who explained what the man was saying in the chat room. The mother than practically dictated to her what to reply. She wanted her daughter to find a husband. This is very degrading, I mean, I think it's wrong that people do this". But I also knew that this could only take place in an IC where women would feel comfortable in the first place. During one of my visits to *Sirhaan Net* the place was very lively and people were doing all sorts of things. This was clearly related to the fact that Sahar and her sister, two women, were running the IC and tried hard to make it pleasant. One of the costumers was online with his girlfriend. He asked Sahar how to answer some of the 'girl stuff' that his girlfriend was asking him about on the MSN. She jokingly replied "You have to treasure your sweetheart or she will dump you my dear." Sahar told me: "Sometimes it's like a family gathering. At Ramadan all our costumers, old and new, come and stay with us. Once we made *iftar* (breaking of the fast) for the close costumers, and during Eid we had a small party."

Everyday politics and informal relations like the IC interior or personality of the employees can make a difference. What struck me in *Inner Space,* also in the Beirut

camp Bourj al-Barajna, was the smooth coexistence referred to before: young women, macho boys, a parent, worker, a Hadj… and they did not interfere with each other. The Hadj told me that he likes the IC, and later added that the girls shouldn't chat so much with boys (which meant he knew what they were doing), but he said it was not his business. A young client sitting a few computers away from the Hadj, told me that she sometimes goes out of the camp in order to have a private chat with a man because she doesn't want to risk someone finding out that she might meet him. Paintings and other decorations have an impact on the atmosphere of an internet space as well. It can make a place more youthful, political, serious, or romantic.

In *Inner Space* in Bourj Barajne Intifada posters and informative lists with a selection of popular websites and chat rooms were found on the walls. In Nahr al-Bared evocative murals of Palestine brightened the Sumoud internet centre. At this ABP internet centre they sometimes had the lights off, only the blue computer screens provided a dim light. And when the coordinator smoked his *argila* (water pipe), passing it to others in the room, the intimate ambiance was complete.

The way ICs dealt with social realities was crucial for their eventual acceptance. Meanwhile, local organizations started internet centres. They created practical opportunities for women and girls to participate in a public space. Sanaa, a divorced mother in Ein al-Hilwe who learned to use the internet via the computer and internet courses offered by the local community organizations, made many friends online and told me she feels happy because people accept me for who I am" and that "it was the first time I met people that were different from me". The inevitable has happened as more ICs opened their doors, even where ICs caused many debates. In 2004 I conducted interviews in at least three ICs in Ein al-Hilwe. I even found a mixed IC though people were still saying this was nonexistent in Ein al-Hilwe.

Moreover, the fact that in *Al Jaleel* all computers had mirrors on the wall that face the screens (for the owner to see what was being viewed online) and the separated space for female costumers might be considered an example of (religiously motivated) restriction, it was not always experienced as such. Several girls/women specifically enjoyed *Al Jaleel* because it gave them extra privacy, and the men do not see what they write. The curtain was not a sign of oppression but gave them liberation as it offered the legitimacy to go to the public IC. However, the new impacts of the IC, and the virtual window opened to the public, in some places caused exceptionally tense situations.

In Nahr Bared the internet was even labelled *haram* (prohibited by Islam) for a while. Yazan was also in Nahr al-Bared at the time the stories about internet cafes grew out of proportion. I wanted to know how it was for him to use the net - his father did not allow him initially: "I used to tell my father to come with me and see with his own eyes. But he would refuse and say that the people said it was 'bad'. I said everyone uses the net according to his own aims, bad or good. At the end I convinced him to let me go". The internet created so many disputes in this camp that it was discussed during Friday prayers. When it became a concern and people started talking about it inside and outside the mosques, serious debates started.

I asked Sheikh Ahmed in Nahr al-Bared, and Sheikh Mounir Maqda (Al Aqsa party) in Ein al-Hilwe, about women and ICs. In their opinion, ICs are acceptable when used with respect to religion. Mounir Maqda told me that his advice for both young men *and* women is to:

> Learn about the internet because it's a means to resist and a tool for education… When Salah al-Din (Saladin) liberated Bait al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) he used pigeons to exchange information with his army leaders because it was the fastest means of communication. Now the internet technology is.

The Sheikh outlined to me how he views the internet:

> Islam is a religion that appreciates knowledge and science. Many people have ignored or missed this point and instead depict Islam as anti-progressive. But the first aya (verse) of the Qur'an "Iqra'!" (read!) is clear evidence of the value of knowledge in Islam. The internet can be considered as part of science and generates knowledge. Allah says "Qul hal yastawi al-lathina ya'lamuna wa al-lathina la ya'lamun?" [Are those who know and those who do not know equal?], the answer is 'Only those who are educated will know.'

After he was confronted with what internet cafes meant and offered, the Sheikh views changed from discouragement, to testing the internet himself, and eventually sharing his positive internet experiences in the Mosque. If you *can't beat it, join it*, seemed the philosophy. As confirmed by the interview with Sheikh Ahmed, it is problematic to essentialize the way a community regards the internet.

According to Sheikh Ahmad, the notions about internet were predominated by the fear that: "in the beginning people thought it was nothing more than a screen that displays pornography. The young men stormed the ICs even when many didn't have the slightest idea about computers; they saw it as a magic screen." The mosque countered the negative use of the internet in the camp, instructions on proper behaviour and ethical internet use were aired during Friday sermon. It was clear from the stories that the disputes were fused by a sense of morality. Eventually, the internet (café) was, *faith-a-compli,* a fact. Nevertheless, acceptance was related to certain rules referring to frameworks about what were considered 'the good' and 'the bad' aspects of the internet.

Rules of Engagement: Morality, Ethics, and the Internet

> We contacted the IC owners and invited them for a meeting. Sometimes we visited their IC to explain how they could work better. One of the suggestions was to make a list of the best educational and religious websites and how to communicate with our brothers and sisters in Palestine. It took a few months. Most cooperated but in a few cases they said they are free and will allow whoever wants to use it in his way.
>
> – Sheikh Ahmad, Nahr al-Bared, 2003.

After the involvement of the Sheikh to convince ICs to behave according to Islamic values, the situation improved in Nahr al-Bared. Sheikh Ahmad also went to Najde Women's Centre and approved their (mixed) ABP internet centre. He was satisfied that all screens In Najda were visible to the coordinators. At Friday prayer, some time later, the Sheikh referred to Najde as a 'safe' and 'clean' place. The general condition seemed to come down to the notion of a "clean" IC, one that should preferably not be mixed or should offer separate spaces for men and women. But in reality, these rules were not strictly applied.

It is important to understand that ICs and internet centres are set-up by people with different intentions and social or material abilities. This is also reflected in the kind of clientele it attracts and by catering to a specific style of behaviour and engagement. Islam is an important reference point for many Palestinians. During fieldwork in Jabalia camp in Gaza in 2002, it was clear that men dominated the ICs. Yet I met one woman in a local IC in the camp. As a lawyer working in the camp and using the IC for her work she was one of the forerunners to open the road for other women to claim their seat in the IC, often legitimizing their presence by referring to the equality of women in the Quran. This kind of agency was also apparent by those student and community activists struggling for a women-only IC or space.

As characteristic of any religion: the implications can be both negative and positive; references to Islam were used to either encourage or discourage internet use and female participation in ICs. The variable status vis-à-vis the (mixed) internet places corresponds to the differences exhibited in attitudes and practices. Ahmed and Maqda explicitly encouraged internet use and both used religious or political legitimacies to emphasize their position. When I asked how internet use is affected by social restrictions like gender bias, Sheikh Ahmad said: "The Prophet's words are clear when he said 'seeking knowledge is a duty which every Muslim must fulfil. Muslim means both male and female." And he continued:

> The good side of the internet is clear, but it also harms. Many dangers are present and no one can avoid them. Also in politics there are sites that propagate certain ideas influenced by globalization and the New World Order. They are a threat to our children's mentality and mind, especially because our religion and country is targeted.

What they confirm is that the image and "status" of the IC is also important; how others refer to it and how people talk about it is sometimes more important than the actual practice itself. To understand the complex dynamics, I needed to scratch the surface and uncover the internal rules and social structures that lie underneath.

Officially, thick curtains separate women from men, and mirrors behind the computers allows the manager of *Al Jaleel* IC to glance at the screens (Picture 22). But when I spent time in *Al Jaleel*, two groups of boys and girls assembled at one computer. I asked if they were allowed to do that and they told me with a smile that they were doing a school project as a group, so they really had to sit together. Several times the owner would leave the place to run errands, leaving a young assistant to watch the place. In practice this meant that customers could open any website. Thus

the 'image' and perception of a place generates its status: and the *potential* control works as a self-censor to prevent 'misbehaviour'.

This hypothetic control is also employed with regards to internet content. Some ICs try to place firewalls to block porn sites, others 'clean' (check) each pc after a costumer leaves; sometimes it happens that a costumer is asked not to open a certain site when he returns. One of the providers who had an internet centre and also connects people at home, sometimes even monitors his clients. Beside his own internet centre in his youth organization *Al Karame*, he checks on others as well. I asked about his motivations:

> After getting the monitoring equipment it became easy for me. I don't monitor the ICs that connect through us because they should make their own control. But subscribers at home, yeah, sometimes I monitor them. … Before my clients even knew that they were being watched the majority were surfing porno sites. I intervene, I basically warn the user twice before I disconnect him. I just tell him so that he knows I know, to make him feel ashamed and think twice before doing it again. I am mostly surprised by those clients who call themselves "devoted Muslims".

The new (internet) interactions at ICs are important in Palestinian society where overt public expressions of love or sexuality are discouraged. With ICs, the internet was a vehicle for visualizing the dream of a territorial Palestinian space, and for dreaming about many more exciting new possibilities. The internet 'glue' got stronger when grass-roots interactivity and participation increased. Like the different rules of engagements in everyday life showed, this did not only alter online communication, but also their everyday articulations. In the next section I discuss the articulations/practices in Palestinian ICs that contributed to processes of change.

6.5 Beyond 'Contested': Everyday Manifestations of Agency

> [T]he protection of the screen gives individuals the opportunity to overcome inhibitions and fears without violating the principles and values with which they were raised. …. Communication face-to-face is often not relaxing given the strict rules of modesty in public engagement, online communication flows more freely, giving the user an unprecedented opportunity to learn about other opinions, at the same time that they develop their own (Wheeler 2006:13-14).

A poster on the wall of a small 4-by-4 meter space of the IC drew my attention; the image evoked a sense excitement and rebellion. On a yellow-red background with the Golden Dome and al-Aqsa' mosque in the back, the poster represented images of clashes and injured Palestinian teenagers being carried away. The collage of images included the shape of a boy swinging his catapult; the picture seemed to be taken just before the stone shot out of the catapult. Turning away from the poster, I saw screensavers of Palestinian images/maps and pictures of Che Guevara. The moving images, as well as the poster commemorating the Intifada in Bourj al-Barajna camp in

2004 were significant in different ways. Firstly, they show that the interior images promote a sense of mobilization or national unity, and secondly that they are also spaces of contestation and rebellion. The feelings and the imagination that the poster evoked reminded me of Palestine two years earlier. I started telling Akram, the manager of the place, about the 'curfew café'.

In Ramallah in 2002 the curfew and Israeli military actions had stripped Palestinian cities of their customary liveliness. Rukab Street once overflowed with life—cars and wagons choked its intersections and pedestrians milled around its shops and stalls—but was now eerily silent. Rami (my friend and, on that day, my guide) and I cautiously had to avoid IDF patrols. We had, in fact, a calm walk through Rukab Street. A few people scattered toward the dim lights of shops and homes, while a single car sped past the closed storefronts with its motor echoing through the nearly empty roads. Many walls were pocked with bullet scars and posters of martyrs, and scrawled with graffiti. These scenes symbolized the re-occupation of Palestinian towns that began in 2001/2002.

Because the street was effectively empty, some details (normally hidden by the cars, stalls, and people), came to the fore. One image on the pavement was particularly striking: that of an Israeli tank crossed out and circled in red. I later discovered that international activists spray-painted this image as a sign of protest. The graffiti seemed to shout out a clear, though simple, message, and we both smiled at the thought of how seriously Israeli soldiers would take it. In the past five years, hundreds of tanks and bulldozers have ploughed through Palestinian towns and villages, levelling homes, buildings, schools, and gardens—leaving only ruin in their wake, not bothered by international law or grass-roots protest. This reality became common for many Palestinians in the occupied territories. Our journey, through what seemed an (occupied) labyrinth, was necessary because it was my first visit to a secretly opened internet café in downtown Ramallah. The curfews that crippled Ramallah, proved how important the offline reality was for access to the internet. I therefore wish to investigate the use and impact of the internet in these offline Palestinian settings more directly in terms of *agency*.

A few hours before the labyrinthine tour through the streets of downtown Ramallah with Rami, I had been interviewing the people and observing the place. Like the rest in the people in the IC, I was actually breaking the IDF rules. On a curfew day no one was to be on the street, this collective punishment was maintained as a common practice for at least two years in many West Bank cities. Usually the curfew lasted either the whole day (24 hours) or from 17.00-05.00.[175] It was 19.00 and I had been in the IC since 17.00. After walking around the room, talking with some of the costumers, and checking my own email, I returned to my seat. I was near the desk where Mahmoud, the young manager, sat with a few other friends. Not far from the desk sat one of the new customers who enthusiastically said to his friends: "Look, she

[175] Israeli jeeps drive through neighbourhoods and announce the curfew. Sometimes we don't know if it will be curfew and then we'd here the soldiers in their speakers shouting the announcement that a military curfew is imposed from.

said 'I'm fine, and you?' and she asks me where I live, what do I reply!?" Mahmoud was smoking a joint with his friends in the space behind the desk. The guys went in and out but the smell gave them away. When I made a joke about it, Mahmoud replied by asking me if I wanted to join. I jokingly answered "No, not during work". Mahmoud would normally not have allowed it, but it was not a normal work situation: it was *mani' tajawwul* (curfew). The thought of Israeli jeeps patrolling the streets at the same time made everything feel unreal.

The offline impact of the internet is also determined by (social-cultural) power-relations and the complex experiences of being a Palestinian *outside*, alienated from Palestine. Exiled Palestinians are in constant mediation between their host-state denial to basic equal rights and citizenship, and Israel's refusal to the Right of Return. Consequently, displaced Palestinians deal with a complicated reality because they are not in their country, though sometimes just a stone-throw away from what was previously their land. The new online encounters reconnected a part of the fragmented community because exiled Palestinians can visit their people and places. After describing the remarkable *Curfew Cafes*, I will study the new possibilities of friendship and romance. This chapter will thus end by illustrating virtual relationships between Palestinians *inside* and *outside*.

Curfew Cafes

> During curfew, people here act like a family, there is more solidarity, people offer each other cigarettes, ask and give advice, etc. Normally we don't allow alcohol in the IC, but during curfew we sometimes let people have a drink. It's what we also feel in the neighbourhood or supermarket these days, in the Intifada people help each other to survive and continue.
>
> – Mahmoud, Chat Net

Computer screens illuminated the curfew café, giving the space an even cosier atmosphere. I was sitting comfortably with the cup of tea that Mahmoud had offered me and was trying to take notes, but my attention was drawn to the guy who had been informing his friends about his chat exchange. He later told me that he works in a restaurant kitchen and had never used the internet before. He only came to the internet café because it was near to the restaurant; there was nothing else one could do during curfew anyway. He was smiling and had a friendly face, but from time to time it switched to a grimace. I could imagine a balloon above his head with the text "What the hell am I suppose to do now?" This expression was further confirmed by his tensed body: face down, shoulders bowed, two fingers waiting anxiously above the keyboard, his eyes searching for the right letter, then hitting the keys as he writes his reply to the girl online.

This all took some time, but after he finished a sentence he would gaze at the screen awaiting a sign. When he finally received feedback he was noticeably delighted. He said to his friends again: "She said she is fine, but now she asks me where I live". A few friends cracked some jokes; one guy said "So now you are

chatting too huh, well well well…" But he couldn't be bothered by the teasing and was thrilled by this new experience. "What more did she tell you, yallah [come one], tell us", the guys continued. He didn't answer because he was concentrated and repeating the same ritual: face down, shoulders bowed, two fingers pointing at keyboard, his eyes screening for the right letter, and tak! More guys were surrounding him now, patting him on the shoulders, trying to help him and asked what she had replied. The guys teasingly said that he just lost his "*internet virginity"* with this first chat encounter, but they were supportive and amicable. After a while everyone went back to their own computers and continued surfing the net, playing games, writing emails, or chatting too.

This semi-public setting represents many levels of analysis when we discuss a setting under occupation; and thus the IC cannot be divorced from its material/political location. These impacts on the setting determined the access, experience, quality, participation, atmosphere, style and/or duration of internet use in that particular space. Palestinian public sphere, infrastructure, capital and power, and Palestinian social values crystallize in a grass-roots view. The IC under occupation is a unique culmination and Mahmouds IC continued to provide connectivity despite the curfew, that's why we all called it the *curfew café*. So when laughter burst out when the guys were teasing their friend, Mahmoud urged "Shht not so load, the soldiers will hear us when they pass by." Turning around to the table next to him, he said: "leave the guy alone" while nodding at the new chat user. But the young man didn't seem bothered anyway, and continued his online adventures as if it were the best thing he had done that day, curfew or no curfew.

My trip in Ramallah with Rami during this curfew night confronted me with an important element of the public character of ICs in Palestine. *Chat Net*, located in the centre of Ramallah, was the first (and for a while the only public place) that rebelled against curfew and didn't close its doors to customers while the city seemed like a ghost town. Most people in *Chat Net* probably would have preferred to be in a restaurant, have a drink somewhere, or walk on the streets. Of course, many clients are frequent internet users and perhaps would have been there anyway because at the time many people did not have internet connection at home. Mahmoud wasn't really sure about this experiment, but his friends and regular customers almost forced him:

> It started when I was cleaning and organizing my things to close the IC before curfew started at 17.00. Costumers came to check if we were staying open, some people were going out even during curfew and wanted to use the internet. We decided to try and open after 18.00. Now we almost earn the same as on a normal day. I don't find curfews boring; I'm using my time being with people and making my money. They didn't manage to stop my life like they did with many others who are locked up.[176]

Customers enjoyed it and were angry when Mahmoud had to close for maintenance. The IC was used for entertainment as well as for work. Many that were

[176] Interview 09-09-2002 Ramallah

living near the building, and some willing to take more risks, came to finish work. One of the costumers I spoke with was working for a CD production company and was busy surfing the net for pictures of celebrities for the CD covers, and he downloaded the titles of the songs. Another person actually had internet at home but decided to come to the curfew café because: "I live very nearby and it is very lonely at home, here we meet and talk to each other. On normal days I only work, but during curfew a visit to the IC is my main activity". Many others clearly came to Chat Net to overcome the boredom and loneliness typical of curfew days. During the day, before curfew was imposed, I had also spent time in the place; then it was much more crowded, with loud music and noise. Now it was quiet and almost dark.

16-year-old Ali was chatting in a Palestinian chat forum, meeting his friends or introducing himself to new people online. They talked about personal things, and how the political situation affected them: "Even though I am here and trying to continue my usual things, I feel under control. It is the true meaning of being 'occupied', it hurts me deeply to know that there are foreign soldiers in my city at this moment". They also exchanged the latest news about other West Bank cities where some of their common friends lived. He told me he used the internet much more during curfew than at other times. Eid from al-Bireh was 14 years old and younger than the other boys. He told me enthusiastically, "I mainly like to chat to anyone so that I can improve my English; I want to become a singer you know". He and his two friends had a rock band called 'The Golden Three'. He was viewing all kinds of music sites and was checking the latest celebrity news. He also collected information and ideas for the website they planned to make. I asked him whether he wasn't scared coming all the way from al-Bireh (suburb of Ramallah), which was relatively far: "I think Israelis want us to feel scared all the time. Today I managed. When there is a very tough curfew with jeeps in our own streets I don't come, I then ask my neighbour who has internet if I can use it."

Some of the teenagers in the IC came from surrounding districts by special 'curfew taxis'.[177] Most customers enter *Chat Net* just before curfew hour (17.00), so then they have to find a way back home late at night. The risks are also part of the reason why there were no female clients the night I was there, Mahmoud explains:

> During curfew there will be less girls or children because of the danger. The reason is mainly the danger. If soldiers catch a boy they will hit him or arrest, if not shoot him. But if they catch a girl this causes more problems for her and her reputation and maybe they might do other things as well. Only girls that live very nearby come to *Chat Net* sometimes.

Hence the curfew café filled a gap, but could not always overcome the dangers caused by IDF operations. Though special measures were taken, like turning the sound and light off, the IC was not completely safe:

> We keep the lights down so that the Tanks won't see us. I'm taking extra

[177] These taxis were taking great risks because army snipers have killed several people that were outside during curfews.

> risks but the costumers are not afraid; they already broke their fear by coming here. I actually used to be the scared one. Once a tank passed by in this street and it felt like the building was going to collapse, everything was shaking. I jumped to switch everything off but the customers started to laugh at me, saying 'look, the boss is scared!'

Unlike Eid and his other teenage friends from al-Bireh, many of the clients live or work in the centre of Ramallah near the IC. Apart from the usual customers and friends of Mahmoud, some of the new clients are restaurant workers forced to spend the night in their workplace in the centre. Most of them were new internet users who had just learned to email and use chat programs. I talked with a few of the local workers and one of them was Ahmed, who became curious: "I am a new user, I work a lot, so I never have time for the internet. Now I started to understand the basics, but I want to learn more." He saw friends and colleagues enjoy their time advantageously during the useless curfew days, and wanted to try this out as well.

During Curfew, *Chat Net* was much more relaxed, cheerful, and helpful compared to my visits during the normal opening hours. There was definitely a different atmosphere in the place. When I left with Rami around 22.00, people were still enjoying their time, on the emails and chat, working, or surfing the news sites. One of the clients was walking in his *jilbab* (traditional home dress), apparently feeling at home, and Mahmoud was preparing some snacks for his friends; this public place had the private atmosphere of a home. During meetings in the ICs and their online communication, people were experimenting with new personal encounters. With their agency they managed to deal with some of the challenges while under occupation or in exile, and enjoyed new friendships or the pleasures of flirting and love affairs.

New Challenges: Romance and Friendship

> Some girls do not like chatting with me, many people view chatting as something between men and women. Also some men don't continue when they know I am 33 and have a child, I don't like to hide this. Some politely say 'sorry, you are not the person I prefer to chat with'. But other people don't have a problem, especially my contacts in Palestine became good friends. When we meet online they ask about my daughter because they know my story. I feel so happy when people accept me on the net, even though there will be those who don't accept me as a divorced mother. I do have friends in the camp, but my experiences with the online friends are different, it's like meeting new people, with a different mentality, it opened a new world for me.
>
> – Safa, Ein al-Hilwe camp, Lebanon, 2004.

The following from Wired magazine is most probably the case for upper-class individuals who can afford to jump on a train or plane or wave their North American or EU passports in a way that looks as easy as surfing to another website: "Pretty soon we will stop distinguishing between online and off, dating site or virtual

community. The internet has become as ordinary as any church group, running club, or singles hangout when it comes to meeting a special someone or two. … We've finally accepted that it's the connection, not the connectivity that counts." [178] Stories about *virtual love*, sexuality, or friendships rarely touch on *real* problems like inaccessibility or immobility. Generally, people cannot just take a plane and meet their future friend, spouse, or lover once they find them online. The experiences of young Palestinians are certainly a world apart.

Nevertheless, internet communication does open up new social configurations by allowing access across class/borders. Safa's experiences in the opening quote confirm how gender and social norms are part of the new public internet spaces. According to Wheeler (2003), the "most magnetic quality of internet which drives Kuwaiti youth to the net is the way in which it enables to transgress gender lines … interrupting traditional social rituals and giving young people new autonomy on how they run their lives". The positive and negative effects of internet have impact on everyday relationships and face-to-face manifestations because they are partly conditioned by them. The debate about "right" and "wrong" values of internet is often reduced to issues of sexuality/love. Friendships through internet are important too; Chatting is not just a 'waste of time' or meaningless entertainment.

Online (romance) adventures enriched people's social networks and often increased the self-confidence of the people I talked with. Sanaa was a divorced woman whose husband took away her children and left her with no income and a load of guilt and shame. She told me how she 'left the harsh life in a camp in Lebanon, to live in a cave in Canada', i.e. to be trapped/isolated (again) and a dependent wife. She could not continue that life with her husband, and returned to the camp alone. Feeling depressed and socially excluded made the internet an even more comforting space for her to escape from time to time. Sanaa shows how a unique experience via the internet can change a persons' life. The only time that she was not in her miserable routine was with her new online friends that accepted her for who she is. Once she even met a man whom she had a very open relation with in a chat room. She explained to me how she was a different person when she started using the internet:

> I found lots of people, and even met some here in Lebanon. I was specifically interested in men from the Gulf. One guy from the Gulf was very rich and so nice with me. When I knew what it means to talk to people about my feelings I started doing it to help myself. I just wanted to have good times for a change. But then something great happened: One day we were on the internet and the next day he was sitting next to me when he visited Beirut on a business trip. We talked about everything. He only stayed six days so we met a few times in the afternoons. Before he left he encouraged me to go back to school. He also said I should fix my teeth [laughs] and to send him the dentist bill whatever it cost. I didn't do that of course, but it was very kind.
>
> I didn't tell this to anyone, the consequences are different because I am a

[178] "Beyond the Dating Database" by Regina Lynn. Wired, March 11 2005

> divorced woman. No one would believe that I met a guy from the Gulf in a hotel that was my friend online. No one would believe I didn't have sex because I am not a virgin anymore to prove it. But you know those times were so exciting; the best days of my life. I stopped looking on the internet for a husband, it doesn't work that way, it was my aim but I didn't believe in it anymore.

The IC was at a one minute walking distance from her house, a friend of the family was working there, and her brother and sister also went there, so it was an *accessible space* for Sana'. When she said that she "stopped looking for a husband" online, she acknowledged that this was one of her aims. But these motivations were usually part of a blend of experiments. The friendships, romantic experiences, and new networks manifest the impact of internet on everyday lives especially in times of need. It also for the first time offered romance between the diaspora and Palestine. 'Love' is one of the most exciting topics about the influence of internet use. A search for intimacy and love may also be evidence of loneliness and alienation in everyday life. Maryam from Shatila, who already had two internet boyfriends before, could not keep the excitement about her escapades to herself. Maryam:

> When I told my neighbour about meeting guys online she became so curious and also started to chat with guys. Now she is also making boyfriends and meeting them. It adds something to your life, it allows escaping the daily life of school and home, you can meet new people and go out of the camp. Maybe even by being in the IC you can meet new people; most of the employees are guys anyway. Its nice, normally we can't do new things in the camps.
>
> Once my mother went to the IC to get my sister because it was getting late. My sis was chatting and mom sat beside her till she finished. She was chatting with a guy but my mom didn't understand the romantic exchange in English!

Online love and dating means one is not dependent on family or other matchmakers. It also means that people do not have to always meet in secret to talk anymore. In fact, as Safa' had said in the opening, sometimes women didn't even want to chat with each other much. Hala from Bourj al-Barajne explains some of her encounters with other Arab women online: "I don't even get a chance to talk: she's gone before I even finished the sentence "hi, I'm a woman from…!". There is not one general attitude during these online escapades, however, some of the women I interviewed in Lebanon told me they sometimes felt disappointed: "When people ask where I'm from and I say Lebanon they are very interested, but once I say I'm originally Palestinian and that I want to know about the situation in Palestine, they loose interest." What struck me were the special online romances between Palestinians in the diaspora, and particularly between some *inside* and *outside* Palestine.

Most people in Lebanon and Jordan agreed that being in love with someone in Palestine tops all else. One of the clear examples of a (idealized) view about

Palestinian men in Palestine, and direct contact through internet, was from 25-year-old Palestinian Zainab from Beirut:

> Ahmed was one of the *tanzim* (resistance faction of Fatah) activists during the siege of Bethlehem. They showed it on television, they were forced to eat grass because they were trapped inside the church for weeks. When I got his email through a friend I convinced myself to write him. I took some time before I decided to send it because I was afraid it was not the same person, or maybe the one answering me was an Israeli. Two days later I received a short reply, he said "Yeah, I am the one whom the sons of bitches have kicked out from his own country". It was a short email but I recognized the Palestinian dialect in his phonetic script, I was sure he was a Palestinian. We corresponded a couple of times, I emailed him a lot, even though he didn't answer back all the time. But he asked me to send him as much as possible because he really appreciated it. I think he was lonely. He asked me about other Palestinians in Lebanon, and if people were still committed to the cause, and what we were doing in our daily lives. He didn't write much about himself but as long as he was writing back, it was fine for me.

Several times that we met she mentioned Ahmed, during our talks I sensed that Zainab was in love with him. But she was also puzzled because she realized he might not feel the same. But the internet cannot transgress all boundaries although Zainab in Lebanon loves Ahmed in the West Bank, alas it is almost sure they will not meet.

Internet and love provided rich anecdotes as I heard numerous stories from many people. When I met Dali and we discussed this, her experiences resembled a science fiction tale. Her experiences were particularly sad because of the meaning of being in love as a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon with someone in Palestine:

> You feel like drifting away as if no one is around you. The only aim is to talk with him. But I want to see him, something is missing. Then I feel I shouldn't make the mistake of talking about love, just politics and Palestine because it's impossible for us to meet anyway. It's hard.

Feeling broken-hearted by an internet lover is complicated in a situation of exile. And sometimes contact suddenly stops for weeks or longer with their cyber lovers or friends in Palestine. Several girls told me how in some cases they later found out that their friend was dead, injured, or arrested. Evidently, with such contacts also came the hardships, but there were also many refugees who were experimenting with online lovers in more accessible contexts.

Some of my female contacts in Lebanon met face-to-face with their online date from Beirut, sometimes from a refugee camp as well. During our group meetings they shared their excitement; "It was so exciting, I met X at Verdun, but my god, he was so ugly!". This response is similar to the reaction in Elia Sulaiman's film when the girl eventually leaves Palestine on a journey to find her internet love. When she finally found him, she hurried off; he was nothing like what she had been fantasizing about. Interestingly, Mahmoud from Shatila said that sometimes online dating is nicer than offline: "I chatted with this girl for 3 or 4 months. It was nice but when we met, everything changed."

The online relation can also be the result of previous offline meetings. The summer is usually a very exciting and happy time, with lots of gatherings and parties. Many Palestinians living outside visit their families in Jordan or Lebanon, and many foreign volunteers come to work in the camps. Even more important are the International Youth camps with groups of Arabs from different countries, including from Palestine. Every year in Lebanon, summer loves come about as the result of the youth camps or family visits. Without the internet, the new friendships and relationships would have been difficult to maintain. This is even more problematic when communications between the people involves a different language. People invent alternative ways to bypass linguistic problems during the predominantly English/text based communication of the internet. Writing in phonetic style or using numerical symbols to express specific Arabic tones and letters became common practices. Internet usage is also a flexible process; internet is itself a tool to overcome linguistic barriers. Samir from Bourj Barajne met his girlfriend during the summer when she came with her parents from Denmark to visit the family. Like Samir, people created the *lou'at al internet*, (internet language, Picture 24), to manage the trans-lingual communication. Samir, who is normally a construction worker, did so with his girlfriend to overcome their language barriers. He writes spoken and slang words, using numbers to accentuate specific Arabic letters.[179]

Many young Palestinians were using the internet to migrate; surfing to find a job or scholarship to study outside, although it is nearly impossible for most people to receive a scholarship in the West—especially after 9/11. As Ali from *Future Net* in Ramallah explained, many of his clients are students. Beside their studies, emailing, and chatting many also surf to find information about grants and how to obtain a visa. Internet love is sometimes also employed for the purpose of leaving the country. The following is an extract of a private group interview with young men from Shatila camp regarding their ideas about leaving the country, which actually evolved from discussing the internet:

> A. The conditions here are hard. If she is abroad, like in Sweden or Denmark, etc. she could help me leave, I can later get a European citizenship– One now thinks with his mind not his heart (…) I could love a girl here for four or five years and then couldn't marry her in the end because I am [financially] unable, so its worthless. I experienced that, just imagine–after loving someone for five or six years, at the end someone else comes who has money and takes her, just like that. For everyone, whether educated or not, the most important thing is to leave now. M.D. Yes, some guys pretend that there is romance, love, and everything. But some actually really do – A. No, ok there may be a romance even if it's only via the net, but not true love. How could someone love me via the net? It's not love, it's self-interest. I pretended that I loved my internet girlfriend, at the end when I asked her hand, her family humiliated me with

[179] Using numerals to transcribe Arabic language became a general linguistic practice for internet and sms. For example, 3 stands for the Arabic letter 'ain, 5 for kha', 6 for ṭa', 7 for ḥa' etc. When I saw transcripts from Samir's msn discussions I could not unravel the text at first. Some existing signs were also adapted to make chatting or sms easier; like: w8, lol, cos, plz, c u.

> all their demands. That was too much for me, so I simply said 'fuck off and good-bye' to her. Anyone with money doesn't have to think like that. Then I would have married a girl from the camp whom I know personally and saw daily. M.D. I don't think about leaving the camp. A. Well, maybe only you, but most of us do.

This interview illustrates the juxtaposition of internet, love, and politics in the Palestinian refugee camps. It shows how the virtual space is a tremendous source for people, but also that it does not fulfil all the needs. The online experiences are embedded in the fight for offline mobility and political/social solutions, and part of the everyday struggles.

6.6 Conclusion

Internet Cafes are the offline settings of a virtual Palestine and captures the interlock of virtual and everyday life. This affects both Palestinians inside the territorial boundaries and outside in the dispersed diaspora. Whether used for political or leisure activities, the ICs are spaces susceptible to political, technological, and social changes. Inspired by this dynamic approach it was possible to look *beyond* the practical and obvious manifestations at first sight, and discover the processes of change and agency that co-direct the evolution and participation *beneath* the service of the ICs.

While walking round the camp and hanging around in the local internet cafes I got a view from below which enabled me to see the (illegal) cable networks, UPS boxes, and the creative tapping of satellite connection not noticeable otherwise. Critical anthropology adopts an inclusive perspective in order to see agency in social life online and offline, and how both are dialectically connected. Rather than generalizing internet use, I thus presented the internal dynamics and dialectic relations in terms of economic relations and social class (i.e. affects on and by everyday processes). ICs can be understood as both a tool and an end in itself (in terms of meeting others and engaging in social activities online), and also as both at the same time.

Through the virtual pilgrimages in the ICs I noted interesting changes with regards to how peoples' everyday life impacts internet access and use, and how internet use impacts everyday life. Transgressing the boundaries of ordinary acceptable behavior is one of the crucial changes I discussed. After talking with ISP's and IC owners in the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon about the open character of internet and Islamic rules, I found that mainly gambling and pornography are not allowed. Islam doesn't discourage internet use, and since Muslims actively use this international platform to propagate, disseminate, as well as attain messages, the opposite is true. Nahr al-Bared showed the importance of the agency of refugees that defended internet use, and clarified how different (political/economic) motivations are involved.

ICs offer access to the world to marginal and excluded communities because of its affordable and easy internet connection, allowing them to exchange news and ideas, and also to create new relationships with other people face-to-face because ICs are acceptable public spaces where people can safely assemble. Flirting online and later, if possible, dating offline, are becoming common experiences. Chatting gives way to friendships or romances. Both secrecy and positive self-representation (whether a woman, refugee, Palestinian, or poor, fat, old etc) have found their place in internet's social spaces. Yet, Dali and Maryam show that an online relationship still needs to be *verified* in everyday life, whether by a personal visit or a secret rendezvous. The internet also enables people to overcome gender or refugee discrimination. This led me to a closer analysis of the social functions of such public spaces.

Internet availability and new virtual network communities impose new interpretations about place, time, and space that are best examined in their local setting. By calling for an interrelated process between technology and social practice these changes become visible. The 'junction' between technology and social practices could be seen through love relationships or linguistic styles; alternative cyber slang eases the practice of online flirting/dating. The internet provides models of entertainment and serves as a communicate tool for people separated by geography, culture, politics, or gender. It is also important for empowerment as seen through several case study examples because sharing ideas and feelings with other men and women helps to by-pass existing social isolations. At the same time people can access information about topics related to sexuality or politics, previously unavailable on this scale and with this speed and anonymity.

This chapter related to the first part of the research question—what is *the role of the internet in creating trans-national linkages and imagined Palestinian communities*. However, the political aspect as represented in the second part of the research question—how internet is *used in mobilizing local and trans-national (pro) Palestinian activism*, is clearly present and weaved in the debates about public sphere, Islam, and occupation. Furthermore, the negative impact of (mixed) public ICs and (in the Occupied Territories particularly) their dangerous contexts due to the Israeli military presence, limits the participation of women in (curfew) ICs in general, and young (unmarried) women in the refugee camps in specific. However, many examples of male and female agency also proved that participation in internet activities was high among female students and workers. This confirms the dialectic relation between political-economic structures on one hand, and participation in the information-society on the other. Both directions may impact gender disparities within society. Looking at these everyday *rules of engagement* sheds light on the new attitude/forms of everyday agency. The *publicness* of the IC challenges ruling dominant morals/powers and is therefore in essence political. This is in fact an inevitable consequence when analyzing trans-national online communities from the specific juxtaposition of the off with the online. I will do the same in the next chapter, but there the question will be how the internet provided (pro) Palestinians the opportunity to resist the occupation, mobilize international political support, and engage in cyber warfare with (pro) Israeli's.