

Between storytelling and reporting a story



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Every culture has stories, whether for entertainment, education, cultural preservation, or instilling moral values. Many times, stories address more than one goal simultaneously. These stories are sometimes repeated so often in a family or community that they take on the characteristics of a fairy tale, but not without retaining a hint of the underlying truths. The life cycle of a story from fact to fiction is a discussion for another time, but let's bear in mind that when a story's main medium of travel is oral, a mix of fact, improvisation and embellishment are usually present in the final result.

News, on the other hand, is a special form of storytelling. News is an industry based on multiple professions working in tandem to produce news stories that inevitably and regrettably are filtered through a particular lens in the service of a particular set of values. Moreover, the news biz in today's high-speed and hyper-connected digital world is more specialized than ever with deeply embedded, mutually competing agendas, whether the media sector wants to admit this or not. Objectivity in journalism is a relic of past times, rarely found and often not even sought in the production and presentation of today's news offerings.

News is to storytelling what olives are to consumers. The final product, be it a plump green olive or a crisp, well-written news story, on the surface looks great, but looks are only part of the picture. For a tasty olive to reach our table, it takes a community working in concert; each stage of the olive's life cycle requires its own professional expertise. The farmer plants the trees, not too close together, fertilizes them, and prunes them after every harvest. The olive pickers carry the brunt of the work, stripping every branch of its yield, sifting them of leaves, and bagging them for milling. Milling is done by other professionals who receive whole olives and transform them to a golden oil. Post-harvest, the olive tree is pruned. This is an age-old art, which no two farmers will do identically. Pruning aims to maximize light penetration and air circulation inside the canopy, reduces pests and diseases, prevents aging of the canopy, and eliminates dead wood. Each stage has its practitioners, each

depending on the prior stage to be able to apply their skills to pass the baton on to the next stage. If any stage is mishandled, the olive may still look and feel like an olive, or olive oil, but to a trained eye or tongue, weaknesses in the process are fully apparent.

Like the olive process, so goes the news process. A story happens. A trained journalist is paid to cover it. During news gathering, important pieces of information are collected as well as irrelevant data or unverifiable tidbits. A good journalist will sift out much of what is erroneous or irrelevant in the story, after which the baton is passed to an editor. Like the olive tree pruner, the editor is seeking to shed maximum light on the story while dispensing with the unverifiable tidbits. Sources are then verified and facts are checked. Only after this process is executed can a story move on to an entirely new stage, that of publishing and distribution. This brief portrayal of the process clearly illustrates that the life cycle of a story is just that, a cycle, during which every professional is meant to apply his or her skills to pass on the story to the consumer in the most informative (dare I say objective) way possible (despite the corporate influence on how and what gets reported and the systemic decline in objectivity in our era).

So what does this all have to do with Palestine and our dissemination of our news stories? A lot.

Before we make the jump to the global community, let's briefly reflect on our own domestic news market. With very few exceptions, the process is broken. Like the olive, stories emerge as news, but for any observant consumer of news, much remains to be desired from our mainstream news outlets. Not to dwell on the deficiencies in the system, but how many times is opinion passed on as news, or advertising presented as a news story? How many corporate or public figures draft their own stories and have them published as is, grammatical mistakes and all? Worse yet, how many journalists are on payrolls other than that of their news outlet employer, in order to promote a particular person, company, or political track? This is not the time to evaluate these shortcomings, but let us acknowledge that they exist and make sure we understand that they present a serious obstacle to the advent of a much more demanding and unapologetic global news market.

Back to storytelling

In oppressed communities, such as ours, stories play a crucial role in transmitting from one generation to the next a people's history, as well as the history of their struggle for freedom. We do storytelling well.

Recently the Danish House in Palestine showed a new critically acclaimed English (with Arabic subtitles) documentary by filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel titled, "A World

Not Ours". When Mahdi was nine years old, he moved to Denmark with his parents. Growing up, he went back to his Ein el-Helweh Refugee Camp every summer, the refugee camp in southern Lebanon where his grandfather, uncle and best friend all still lived along with 70,000 other Palestinian refugees. Based on a wealth of personal recordings, family archives, and historic footage, the film portrays three generations living in exile and gives an intimate, often humorous, view of the utter emptiness dominating their daily lives.

Mahdi's story is a real one, heavy with real characters and, real places and brutal glimpses into our real tragedy. Other artists among us, like writer Fida Jiryis, tell our people's stories in a fictional and lighter way, but with an underlying factual setting that anyone familiar with the reality immediately picks up on. Fida is from the Palestinian village of Fassouta, near the border with Lebanon. Her Arabic short stories, titled *Hayatuna Elsagheera* (Our Small Life) and *Al-Khawaja* (The Gentleman), depict daily life in her village in the Galilee, which could be a village anywhere in the world. With wit, humor and an always present sense of reality, Fida brings Palestinian villagers and their daily trials and tribulations to life in a light, comic setting. Fida is one of our storytellers, and like most storytellers, one with a purpose. Hers is apparently to humanize a demonized and battered people, while entertaining the reader along the way.

Another profound effort to transmit our narrative is the Arabic book, *The Barbwire*, by ex-prisoner Esmat Mansour, who spent 20 years of his life imprisoned by the Israeli occupation. Esmat is from Deir Jireer in the West Bank. In this book he depicts Gaza, a place where he has never set foot. His entire portrayal of Gaza is through what he learned while engaging with fellow prisoners from Gaza. Gazans who read the book have noted that he was able to describe the reality of Gaza better than those living in it. Sadly, the book has yet to be translated into English or other languages in order to appeal to a much larger audience. The language barrier is a very substantial obstacle to transmitting our narrative more widely.

I, along with two American colleagues, also had an encounter with trying to transmit the Palestinian people's narrative. The timing was after the First Gulf War in 1991. My target was a Western audience. My vehicle was oral history. We set out to collect and transmit a sample collection of our entire people's story—those under military occupation, those in Israel, refugees and those in the Diaspora. The result was a book entitled, *Homeland: Oral Histories of Palestine and Palestinians*. My co-editors were Staughton Lynd, a noted U.S. labor historian, civil rights activist and author, and his wife, Alice Lynd, the editor of *We Won't Go: Personal Accounts of War Objectors*. We not only collected

the stories of persons from different walks of life, but also professionally edited them—sifting the olives from the leaves—and meticulously corroborated what we recorded with independent references. Thus, the book is footnoted extensively and, as such, the stories carry much more legitimacy from the reader's standpoint. Testimonials such as late, former Smithsonian Institution historian Alixa Naff's gave us the satisfaction of knowing that we had contributed to a larger calling; Naff wrote that *HOMELAND* was "...riveting and moving...an invaluable resource for the study of both the social history of the Palestinians and their struggle for their homeland."

Narratives have many ways to reach a wider audience. News is only one of them.

The news machine

Not being a journalist or media professional, I hesitate to lay out the mechanics of what needs to happen to convert our people's stories into news, and not just our people's stories about our struggle for freedom and independence, but our people's story about everything under the sun, about who we are, how we live and love, how we experience life's challenges, how we deal with tragedy, how we grow our food, dance, enjoy music, and the list goes on.

If we are to enter a global news market, which churns at an amazingly fast pace and is saturated with hyper competition, we must be able to differentiate between our stories and our news. When something newsworthy is identified, we must invest every imaginable effort to tell it in a way that connects to the average reader, through a timely human story, one stripped of any embellishment, exaggeration, or falsehood: well researched, well written, well edited, and distributed professionally; this last task being increasingly challenging given the plethora of media platforms available today.

Bottom line: despite our deep desire for a more objective and less commercialized sector, we have no choice but to learn the media industry, invest in the skills and institutions required, and play its game if we want our stories to be told. The alternative is to keep pressing the send button to thousands of unknown emails and sleeping a long night thinking that we made an impact on the world, whereas in reality we merely tapped the tip of our forefinger against the Enter button on our keyboard.

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