

War on the web: Getting the story out

by [Fred Strickert](#) in the [May 16, 2001](#) issue

During the Vietnam war, pictures of death and destruction filled our television screens. In the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, pictures of terrorized children and suicide bombings have appeared on our computer screens. Anyone interested in following this conflict can log on to sites showing images of demonstrators on the West Bank or of stone-throwing youth facing tanks. If Vietnam was the “living room war,” the crisis in the Middle East is becoming the “computer screen conflict.”

Shortly after Ariel Sharon’s September visit to the Noble Sanctuary, or Temple Mount, in Jerusalem, new Web pages sprouted up from various parts of the West Bank to provide the Palestinian account of the situation. Frequently they included images—some so graphic that they included a “beware of content” disclaimer. The most dramatic of those images showed the death of 12-year-old Mohammed Al-Dura, shot by Israeli soldiers while he was shopping with his father. That traditional media have reminded us daily of the number of children who are the victims is due in large part to the influence of the Web.

During the first *intifada*, in the late ’80s and early ’90s, human rights groups often claimed that the Israeli-controlled news from the West Bank and Gaza misrepresented the ages of the Palestinian victims. In my desk drawer is the front page of the May 6, 1990, *Jerusalem Post*, which reported the death in Bethlehem of a “20-year-old” Palestinian in a demonstration. A number of my students and I had witnessed that shooting, and we knew that the victim was under 14.

The democratized Web world has greatly reduced the possibility of such media manipulation of events. Yes, the Palestinian Authority can still censor damaging video footage, as it did in the case of the mob lynching of two Israeli soldiers, and the Israeli government can put its spin on the news. But the truth is on the Internet for anyone who cares to find it.

With access to the Web, people can easily scan half a dozen different newspapers on their computer screens in the time it takes to drink their morning coffee. In Iowa, where I live, local newspapers often skimp on coverage of the Middle East. Yet the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* are easily accessible to me online, as are stories from Europe and the Middle East. Ironically, the Israeli newspaper *Ha'Aretz* often provides more balanced coverage of the current conflict than does the American press.

The greater the number of sources to which one has access, the greater one's exposure to multiple views and the less likelihood that one can be manipulated. Through the Web, one can easily find Israeli and American Jewish writers speaking out for a lasting peace based on human rights for Palestinians. Perhaps Rabbi Michael Lerner, the editor of *Tikkun* magazine, has had the most impact. His Yom Kippur reflections, first published in the *Los Angeles Times* and widely available on the Web, questioned Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and criticized the military force with which Israel responded to Palestinian provocations. The article led many to cancel their subscriptions to *Tikkun*, while others admired Lerner's courage. Of course, the Web also gives voice to those Christians who see the conflict as evidence of a Palestinian refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist, or who see the establishment of the state of Israel as a major step on the way to the Rapture.

The downside of having so much information available is that it requires quite an effort to review it. This is where informal e-mail networks have the greatest impact. It doesn't take much effort to forward a meaningful piece to a friend—and not much more to send it on to an e-mail list of several hundred. There are probably more readers of articles on the current conflict through e-mail than through online newspapers.

The Web also is important in giving a voice to previously overlooked communities. A general perception concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been that it is entirely a Muslim-Jewish dispute. "Yes, there is a Palestinian Christian community," went this line of thought, "but it's really not a significant player." The Web has gone a long way to dispel that notion and to bridge communication gaps. It is allowing Americans to see the conflict through Palestinian Christian eyes.

Many of the early stories about the Al-Aqsa *intifada* centered on events at the Lutheran-sponsored Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem, which was occupied by Israeli military forces. In response, H. George Anderson, presiding bishop of the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, wrote a public letter to President Clinton. A formal statement from the conference of ELCA bishops followed. These were distributed instantaneously to the more than 3,000 people on the ELCA's list-serve. Then messages from Lutheran leaders like Bishop Munib Younan of Jerusalem and Pastor Mitri Rahab of Bethlehem began to appear on e-mail networks.

Palestinian Christians had found a way to reach a wide audience with news of their plight. They were able to let the world know about the shelling of the Christian villages of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala by the Israeli army, the closures of Bethlehem and other cities, resulting in an economic stranglehold, and the peaceful demonstrations taking place to protest Israel's military occupation of Palestinian territories.

It was only five years ago that the *Palnet and Planet* systems were established to provide the Palestinian community with secure and efficient communication links to the rest of the world. Today up-to-date information is readily available on the Web pages of the Middle East Council of Churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Church Jerusalem, Sabeel, Bir Zeit University and a host of other institutions. Media consultant Martin Bailey, who assisted Jerusalem churches with electronic media development during the mid '90s, now helps them distribute their messages through the Worldwide Faith News Network (www.wfn.org). According to Bailey, this network has become a standard resource for the secular press. Bailey notes that staff of the BBC and a number of stateside news organizations hit the WFN hourly to stay up to date on Middle East and other developments. A measure of WFN's success came when a Jerusalem correspondent contacted it because she was embarrassed that U.S.-based editors had picked up stories from it before she was even aware of them.

The Web has often been criticized as being destructive of community. Yet it has brought Christians separated by great distances together in this time of crisis. American pastors Michael and Susan Thomas at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in old-city Jerusalem wrote that their church bulletin board is covered with e-mail thoughts and prayers from all over the world sent in support of Jerusalem Christians.

I remember my feeling of isolation when I was living in Bethlehem at the time of the Jerusalem bus bombings in the spring of 1996. Phone lines were cut, mail was delayed, and closures separated Bethlehem from the rest of the world. During the past six months of closures and disrupted mail delivery, however, e-mail has still

been getting through. The bond between American and Palestinian Christians has not been severed.

The Web's potential as an agent of change is being tested in its attention to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Last fall an article by public radio reporter Eduard Cohen, "What Americans Need to Know—But Probably Won't Be Told—to Understand Palestinian Rage," appeared on the Web. That this self-critical analysis of traditional media had to be circulated on the Web is telling in itself. When I sent it out on my usual list, I realized that among the recipients were a handful of former students now working for newspapers and small television stations.

Then I began a search for e-mail addresses of neighboring newspaper editors and television anchors so that I might share it with them—a process taking about 45 minutes. My hope was that if I reached even just one of them, the article might have a significant effect on news production in our region. To my surprise a small-city newspaper editor sent me his reply within minutes. One of my former students—the religion newswriter on his staff—had already shared the piece with him. The result was a series of seven front-page articles on the subject. The religion writer was dispatched to spend Christmas in Bethlehem and to report from there.

This is but one of a number of success stories in influencing change among traditional media. Martin Bailey tells of his persistent efforts by e-mail to convince *New York Times* editors to change their customary one-sided reference to "the Temple Mount" to include both "Temple Mount/ Noble Sanctuary." Through the daily vigilance of Ali Abu Nimal, who sends National Public Radio three or four e-mail critiques a day, NPR knows that no reference to rubber bullets, Gilo as a Jerusalem suburb, or Palestinians sending their children into the line of fire will go unchallenged. Perhaps most significant is the increasing number of letters to editors of newspapers large and small by concerned citizens who feel better informed because of the Web.

Unfortunately, the Internet appears to be considerably less successful in influencing Congress. Advocacy groups such as Churches for Middle East Peace periodically send out "Action Alerts" asking concerned people to contact Congress. These e-mail alerts have been able to mobilize a larger number of advocates in a shorter time, as when thousands of people swamped congressional representatives with e-mails concerning House bill 426, which condemned Yasir Arafat and placed all the blame for the conflict on the Palestinians. Nevertheless, the bill passed by an overwhelming 465-30 vote. Congress has not found a way to handle this new means of

communication, which swamped congresspersons with 80,000,000 e-mail messages during the past year. But the Web may yet make a huge difference in giving citizens a more effective voice in government.