

Are YouTube's Policies Biased Towards Palestinians?



7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media

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Executive Summary

In recent years, increasing numbers of Palestinians have reported having their right to freedom of expression suppressed by social networking platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube. In 2019, some organizations documented as many as 1,000 violations including the removal of public pages, accounts, posts, publications, and restriction of access.¹ However, few studies have explored the different dynamics, reasons, and effects behind these violations against the Palestinian digital content, in particular regarding YouTube. This research was designed to explore YouTube's policies and practices towards Palestinian digital content on YouTube, and whether YouTube policies are aligned with human rights in general, and how they are applied to Palestinian content.

The research objectives were achieved by using a qualitative interpretivist methodology. This allowed the researcher to explore in depth how YouTube policies and practices have been applied to Palestinian YouTube content, and compare them to YouTube's own standards and criteria for content. By conducting the snowballing sampling technique, eleven respondents were selected for in-depth interviews. This research qualitative methodological approach includes:

- A literature review of a wide range of literature related to social media violations, in particular YouTube; digital marginalization; YouTube policy and practices; human rights violations; definition(s) of digital violations; online hate speech; online harassment; and online racism.
- Four in-depth interviews with journalists and activists using YouTube;
- Four interviews with human rights defenders in NGOs;
- Two individual interviews with feminist activists;
- One interview with a director of a social media organization.

¹ Social Studio (2019, December 2) Violations of Palestinian content 50% higher than previous month. Retrieved in (February 25, 2019), from <http://sada.social/>

Using Gioia methodology for 'qualitative rigor' findings in inductive research, thematic analysis was employed to reveal four main findings which were categorized in 15 second-order themes. The main four findings of the study are:

- (1) Unclear Definition of Violence.** Problematic and vague understanding of what is 'violent content' based on YouTube policies. This definition in particular has threatened a lot of Palestinian digital content on YouTube.
- (2) Discriminatory Policies and Practices.** Many of YouTube's practices discriminate against Palestinian content. This includes locative discrimination, high surveillance, punishment through channel termination and blocking monetization.
- (3) Emotional Experience of Exclusion.** Emotions of feeling discriminated, isolated, excluded, being angry and disappointed.
- (4) Learnt Tactics and Protective Techniques.** Developing a lexicon of words or visuals that cannot be used on YouTube; blurring threatened visuals, backing-up videos on other platforms (Daily Motion etc.); lobbying YouTube through legal channels and human rights organizations.

These research findings reflected that YouTube policies and practices are not aligned with human rights in general, and Palestinians' human rights in particular. YouTube's policies and practices have several effects on the human and digital rights of Palestinian YouTube users as well as civil society, tech companies, policymakers, human rights activists and defenders, social media users in general, as well as academics and researchers.

Background

YouTube, the American video-sharing platform, was established in February 2005 and bought by Google in November 2006 for USD \$1.65 billion, as one of many of the company's growing number of subsidiaries. In 2015, Google took a new name, Alphabet. In 2019 the revenue of Alphabet was \$136.819 billion, making it one of the companies with the largest revenues in the world.²

Although the revenue of YouTube itself is unknown, in March 2020 after years of campaigning and under pressure from the United States Security and Exchange Commission, for the first time Alphabet disclosed revenue for YouTube. This revealed that YouTube ads generated \$15.15 billion in revenue in 2019, with \$4.72 billion in the fourth quarter alone. This does not include YouTube's non-advertising revenue, like subscriptions for YouTube TV, which are included in Google's other revenue segment. Alphabet's CEO Sundar Pichai said the company has two million YouTube TV paid subscribers, that in the fourth quarter of 2019, the company had a \$3 billion annual run rate in YouTube subscriptions and other non-ad revenue.

Around 500 hours of YouTube videos are uploaded to YouTube every minute.³ In 2019, more than 31 million YouTube channels were recorded. As the popularity and influence of video content grows online, YouTube has become one of the most important channels for distribution. However, many critical voices have been raised regarding YouTube's policies and practices on how it manages and moderates its content. Generally, YouTube has faced criticism over its recommendation algorithms perpetuating videos that promote conspiracy theories and falsehoods⁴, hosting videos that ostensibly target children but also contain violent and/or sexually suggestive content involving popular characters,⁵ among other contradictory policies and practices.

YouTube Policies: Biased and Discriminatory

YouTube's community guidelines are policies stated to keep YouTube 'fun and enjoyable for everyone'. The four main guidelines and policies that are listed on YouTube's Community Guidelines include: Spam and deceptive practices, sensitive topics, violent or dangerous content, and regulated goods. However, many have accused YouTube of removing videos without clearly falling under any of the community guidelines. For example, during the Black Lives Matter movement, a video of a Black female YouTuber, RedPillBlack, was removed from YouTube. In her video, she was criticizing racism against Black people.⁶ YouTube's response

² Elias, J. (Feb 3 2020). Alphabet earnings. CNBC. Retrieved on (Feb 20 2020), from <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/03/alphabet-googl-earnings-q4-2019.html>

³ Funk, M. (January 31, 2020). How Many YouTube Channels Are There?. Tubics. Retrieved on (December 15, 2019), from <https://www.tubics.com/blog/number-of-youtube-channels/>

⁴ Wong, J. and Levin, S. (January 25, 2019). YouTube vows to recommend fewer conspiracy theory videos. The Guardian. Retrieved in (December 16, 2019), from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/25/youtube-conspiracy-theory-videos-recommendations>

⁵ Orphanides, K. O. (March 23, 2018) Children's YouTube is still churning out blood, suicide and cannibalism. WIRED. Retrieved in (December 15, 2019), from <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/youtube-for-kids-videos-problems-algorithm-recommend>

⁶ Hamill, J. (October 3, 2017) DOWN THE 'TUBE' YouTube quietly launches new 'CENSORSHIP' scheme designed to 'limit' access to videos. The Sun. Retrieved in (December 15, 2019), from <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tech/4372177/youtube-accused-of-censorship-over-controversial-new-bid-to-limit-access-to-videos/>

was that her video violated YouTube community guidelines. Therefore, it has been removed. On Twitter, she asked YouTube: "What does it mean when a company owned by rich white people begins censoring black people? Is this the white nationalism I should be scared of?"

Similar stories of censorship started to emerge after YouTube implemented a new hateful content policy in September 2019. Alexander (2019) revealed that more than 100,000 videos and 17,000 channels were removed after the new policy kicked off.⁷ Although YouTube was intending to ban any supremacist content, some offensive and discriminatory videos passed through the test. This included many hateful, homophobic messages that Carlos Maza, the American producer known for writing, producing, and hosting the Vox series 'Strikethrough', experienced on the platform. In response to these claims, YouTube decided that none of this violated their terms of service'.⁸

In Palestine, a research that has studied a sample of 1475 Palestinians, found that YouTube is the second most popular social media platform.⁹ The report also announced the most influential YouTubers in Palestine based on the total number of views, number of subscribers, and number of posted videos.¹⁰ Some of the most viewed YouTube channels in Palestine are from the entertainment industry. They include: Jamal alimwase, Fozi and Mozi, موقع كيفك, وطن وع وتر, other news channels such as Quds Newspaper, Maan Network, Alfalstiniyah TV, Student's Snap (فضائية الكتاب), and some popular artists; Mohammed Assaf, Noel Kharman, Nicolas Antar.¹¹ It was noticeable that in Palestine, human rights defenders, NGOs, and journalists have very low performing content, and in most cases no presence at all on YouTube.

There are no previous studies or secondary data that studied Palestinian viewership and usage of YouTube among Palestinians. In the MENA region, one of the few researches about the use of YouTube is quantitative research from 2018 about the state of social media in the Middle East (Radcliffe and Bruni, 2019).¹² Professor Radcliffe has revealed that the YouTube user rate in the Middle East has increased by 160% in the past three years, with more than 200 YouTube channels in the region that include over one million subscribers.¹³ Despite YouTube's popularity in the MENA region, the company has been accused of violent and discriminatory behavior. This includes deleting videos depicting war crimes during the Syrian war including evidence of a chemical attack (Dahan, 2018) by taking down a YouTube video of the reported attack on Douma, Syria.¹⁴ Moreover, Aljazeera reported in September 2018 that YouTube shut down pro-Syrian government channels, such as the Damascus based SANA TV channel (Aljazeera, 2018).¹⁵

7 Alexander, J. (September 3, 2019). More than 17,000 YouTube channels removed since new hateful content policy implemented. THE VERGE. Retrieved in (December 16, 2019), from <https://www.theverge.com/2019/9/3/20845071/youtube-hateful-content-policies-channels-comments-videos-susan-wojcicki>

8 Inside Edition. (June 6, 2019). Vox's Carlos Maza Calls Out YouTube Over Steven Crowder Videos. Retrieved in (December 16, 2019), from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ksqcbij8SOE>

9 Social Studio. (January 30, 2017). Social Studio Report in Palestine. Retrieved in (December 16, 2019), from <https://socialstudio.me/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/SMRP2016-Eng.pdf>

10 Ibid

11 Ibid

12 Radcliffe, D. and Bruni, P. (2018). State of Social Media in the Middle East [Online]. Retrieved in (December 17, 2019), from https://www.academia.edu/38269463/State_of_Social_Media_Middle_East_2018

13 Ibid

14 Dahan, N. (April 13, 2018). YouTube accused of removing evidence of latest Syria chemical attack. Middle East Eye. Retrieved in (December 16, 2019), from <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/youtube-accused-removing-evidence-latest-syria-chemical-attack>

15 Aljazeera (September 10, 2018). YouTube shuts down pro-Syrian government channels. Aljazeera. Retrieved in (December 16, 2019), from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/youtube-shuts-pro-syrian-government-channels-180910123713025.html>

Documenting Human Rights Violations - Defining Violence on YouTube

YouTube has been a particularly important platform for human rights defenders who are documenting human rights violations and sharing them on YouTube in hopes of raising public awareness and pressuring duty bearers. However, several human rights defenders have also had their content taken down, causing damage to efforts to archive and document human rights violations. Many of YouTube's published policies define what kind of content is likely to be removed.¹⁶ However, specifically the definition of 'violent or graphic content' is vague and often misleading.

In 2017, YouTube content moderation procedures became much more complicated. YouTube started relying on machine learning and artificial intelligence to flag so called 'inappropriate content.' One of the company's justifications for this policy was that machine learning and artificial intelligence could be much more efficient in detecting inappropriate content, as massive amounts of videos are uploaded every minute, making it impossible to manually review. Dia Kayyali, who works with the human rights organization Witness, clarifies that 'YouTube's policy of content moderation has become a double-edged sword, where essential human rights content is getting caught in the net'.¹⁷ She added that computers might be super-efficient in detecting violence but they are not as nuanced as humans, as they are not good at figuring out whether a video is ISIS propaganda or vital evidence of human rights violations.¹⁸ Deleting YouTube videos during crisis and war time has serious implications and can result in deleting historical, visual documents and crucial evidence in later trials.

On a regional level, particularly in Syria, many violations of digital rights by YouTube have been witnessed and recorded. Hadi Al-Khatib, a Syrian journalist and photographer ran an archive of videos documenting human rights violations in Syria, where he verified and documented hundreds of chemical attacks by the Syrian government as a visual and documented proof of witness and evidence to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes.¹⁹ Him and his team collected 1.5 million videos in 2018, when they noticed that over 200,000 videos, or 10% of the collected videos, were taken down and disappeared from YouTube.²⁰ On the contrary, many YouTube videos about the Israeli army on YouTube, regardless of the explicit celebration of militarization and violence.²¹ This unfettered development of violent content has become so normal that celebration, marketing, and advertising of violence, war, killing, and holding weapons are allowed on a platform whose community standards restrict images of violence. One of the most surprising and violating YouTube content is 'Alpha Gun Models' which is run by the Israeli gun model, Orin Julie. She has more than 440,000 followers on Instagram, and a famous YouTube channel, entitled 'I am the Queen of Guns' with more than 2.87K subscribers.²²

¹⁶ YouTube About. Policies and Safety. YouTube. Retrieved in (December 16, 2019), from <https://www.youtube.com/about/policies/#community-guidelines>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ The New York Times (October 23, 2019) Why is YouTube Erasing History? | NYT Opinion. Retrieved in (December 16, 2019), from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOzNCaHLW4I>

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Zig 123ize (August 4, 2017) Israeli women soldiers doing fitness training. Retrieved in (December 18, 2019), from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFYSzCJN4Zs>

²² i24NEWS English (February 18, 2019) Israeli Instagram-Model Turned Online Viral Fame into Business. Retrieved in (December 18, 2019), from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2K8gNyhO74>

Hate Speech, Harassment, and Racism Online

This study also aims to detect and explore online hate speech towards Palestinians and Palestine on YouTube. Hate speech, or what has been defined and categorized as cyber hate, abusive speech, or offensive speech (Blaya, 2019)²³ in previous literature, is extensively embedded in and originated from social network sites (hereafter SNS). Definitions of hate speech vary among different literatures; in general, we can define online hate speech as exposing a group to aggression, prejudice, xenophobia, sexism, discrimination, and racism within online environments. In recent literature, one definition classifies hate speech as a type of speech that takes place online (e.g. social media platforms) with the purpose of attacking a person or a group on the basis of attributes such as race, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, or gender (Johnson, Leahy, Johnson Restrepo, Velasquez, Zheng, Manrique, Devkota, Wuchty, 2019). Other definitions such as Blaya (2019)²⁴ define hate speech as an unwanted content appearing on SNS and the act of depreciating a person on social media platforms on the basis of a number of characteristics that may include and not be limited to religion, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, and nationality.

7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media reported in 2019 about the rise in hate speech targeting Palestinians in Israeli Social Media.²⁵ Findings revealed that every 64 seconds there is a hate speech content posted against Palestinians.²⁶ Throughout 2019, Israeli social media published a total of 495,000 insulting, racist, and inciting posts against Palestinians, mainly in reference to the Israeli elections.²⁷

Another incident of hate speech and harassment, which also reveals YouTube's double-standards, is the discriminatory Israeli Hoodies video.²⁸ The Israeli clothing brand, Hoodies, promoted an islamophobic YouTube video, which is still online. The Israeli model, Bar Refaeli, is seen removing a niqab before sporting a range of different clothes, and before the ads ends with the slogan 'Freedom is basic'.²⁹ After Refaeli shared the thirty-second video on her Facebook page, nearly three million followers were counted (Demopoulos, 2018).³⁰ Sylvia Chan-Malik, an associate professor of Gender Studies at Rutgers University and author of *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color and American Islam*, put it more bluntly. "My first reaction is that it's boring," Chan-Malik said with a weary laugh. "It's just a symptom of the kind of really lazy and flat, unimaginative type of thinking that we're locked in for so many of our conversations these days."³¹ Rage and critics were not well organized or expressed by any particular organization, they

²³ Blaya, C. (2019) Cyberhate: A review and content analysis of intervention strategies, *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 45: 163-172.

²⁴ Johnson, N., Leahy, R., Johnson Restrepo, N., Velasquez, N., Zheng, M., Manrique, P., Devkota, P., Wuchty, S. (2019) Hidden resilience and adaptive dynamics of the global online hate ecology, *Nature*. 573: 261-265.

²⁵ 7amleh (2020). The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, The Index of Racism and Incitement in Israeli Social Media 2019: Israeli elections were the primary reason for increasing incitement against Arabs. Retrieved in (January 4, 2020), from <https://7amleh.org/2020/02/27/index-of-racism-and-incitement-2019-israeli-elections-were-the-primary-reason-for-increasing-incitement-against-arabs/>

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ HOODIES (October 29, 2018) FREEDOM IS BASIC. Retrieved in (December 25, 2019), from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q!OGJkFiU>

²⁹ Face veil

³⁰ Demopoulos, A. (October 31, 2018) Bar Refaeli's Niqab-Removing Ad Denounced as 'Racist' and 'Lazy'. DAILY BEAST. Retrieved in (December 25, 2019), from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/bar-refaelis-niqab-removing-ad-denounced-as-racist-and-lazy?ref=scroll>

³¹ Ibid

were only expressed by individuals over social media. One of the tweets stated: ‘You’ve just scored one of the highest levels of stupidity and racism!’ While another tweet said: “This has to be the most ignorant and racist ad I’ve ever seen and I can’t believe a whole company approved this... I’m disgusted and at a loss of words.” (Jarvis, 2018).³² And yet, the advertisement remained on YouTube.

Online hate speech against women, or what is called ‘online misogyny’ is also prevalent on YouTube and has grown rhetorically more aggressive, as Jane (2017) reveals.³³ On YouTube, along other online platforms, misogynistic speech included content that spread rapidly after Palestinian women, and feminists, protested the dramatic murder of Israa Ghayeb in August 2019. Thousands of Palestinian women marched in different Palestinian cities in a campaign called Tal’at “coming out’ which held the slogans of ‘Free homeland, free women’ and ‘you cannot liberate the land without liberating the women’. Unfortunately, misogynistic posts directed at the women activists and their campaign on YouTube played a negative role in defaming and denouncing the feminists’ activism.

³² Jarvis, J. (October 31, 2018) Hoodies advert starring Bar Refaeli taking off a niqab and stating ‘freedom is basic’ sparks controversy. Evening Standard. Retrieved in (December 25, 2019), from <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/advert-starring-bar-refaeli-taking-off-a-niqab-and-stating-freedom-is-basic-sparks-controversy-a3976646.html>

³³ Jane, E. (2017) *Misogyny Online: a Short (and Brutish) History*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Methodology

This research is a qualitative exploratory research that aims to better explore YouTube policies and practices upon Palestinians digital rights. Thus, a qualitative interpretivist methodology is employed to address the research objectives. Applying a qualitative interpretivist methodology allows the researcher to explore in some depth YouTube policies and practices that have been applied to Palestinian YouTube content. Moreover, qualitative data allows us to better understand YouTube standards, criteria of content inclusion or exclusion towards Palestinian YouTube content.

Research Problem and Objectives

The research mainly aims to better explore YouTube policies and practices upon Palestinians' digital rights, through addressing three main objectives:

How are YouTube policies and practices aligned with human rights in general, and Palestinians' in particular?

How have YouTube policies and practices been applied to Palestinian YouTube content?

What are YouTube standards, criteria of content inclusion or exclusion, towards Palestinian YouTube content?

Unit of Analysis and Selection of Participants (Sampling Technique)

Respondents were selected by using snowballing sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2007).³⁴ According to Belk (2006) the researcher, in purposive sampling, aims to sample the respondents in a strategic way, so that those participating in the sampling are aware of the research objectives being posed.³⁵

Purposively, a sample of eleven respondents (see Table 1 for respondents' profiles) were selected for interviews based on their diverse characteristics and their relevance to understand the addressed research objectives (Belk, 2007).³⁶ Geographical distribution and gender criteria were considered in the sampling process, although the depth of the response was more important than stratifying the sample in a rigid way. The researcher conducted two in-depth sensitization interviews to enhance the theoretical sensitivity, test the emerging themes and to refine the interviewing protocol.

³⁴ Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2007) *Business Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁵ Belk, R. W. (2006) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

³⁶ Ibid

Table 1: Participants' Profiles

Interview Number	Name	Occupation	Activism on YouTube
Interview 1	Ahmad	Journalist and activist	5.93K subscribers 703 videos 1,305,584 views Joined Jan 9, 2018
Interview 2	Khalid	Journalist and Photographer	4.97K subscribers 179 videos 3,649,982 views Joined Feb 24, 2013
Interview 3	Walid	Journalist	76.3K subscribers 168 videos 37,818,147 views Joined Oct 23, 2008
Interview 4	Yazan	Member in Sada Social Center	Editor Chief at Al-Quds News Net. Al-Quds News Net: 64.2K subscribers 21,751,761 views Joined Sep 28, 2011
Interview 5	Majd	Graphic Designer Ministry of Education and Higher Education and Human Rights Defender (B'Tselem)	14.4K subscribers 271 videos 4,722,162 views Joined Apr 11, 2010
Interview 6	Amer	YouTube activist	
Interview 7	Maha	Feminist and activist	
Interview 8	Iman	Feminist and activist	
Interview 9	Noor	Human rights activist at Witness organization	
Interview 10	Barbara	Works at Article 19 organization	
Interview 11	Gabrielle	Works at Article 19 organization	

Data Collection and Measurement Tools

In-depth interviewing was based on a semi-structured schedule 'discussion prompt' which was organized around the research aim and objectives of the study. Respondents were questioned extensively and in-depth. These interviews were taped and transcribed. Interviews varied in duration from 30 minutes to 60 minutes. Some of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, or by telephone, and some interviews were computer-assisted interviews, through the peer-to-peer telephone online application 'jit.si'. Computer-assisted interviews were conducted as the respondents are geographically distant from the researcher (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).³⁷ Questions were not asked in any specific order which allowed the respondent's interests and concerns to decide the order in which the general topics and the appropriate probe questions were discussed. Thus, interviews probes were used to ensure that the information received from respondents reflected what they actually experienced (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991)³⁸ and explored in their internal reality (Carson et al., 2001).³⁹

The semi-structured interview prompt was divided into seven main themes:

- (1) The respondent's YouTube activity and experience
- (2) YouTube policies and practices upon the respondent
- (3) Subjective and emotional experience of the respondent after YouTube policies and practices implementation
- (4) How has the issue been addressed by the respondent?
- (5) How did YouTube respond to the respondent?
- (6) The respondents' opinion and personal views about YouTube standards, criteria of content inclusion or exclusion, towards Palestinian YouTube content, and to what extent YouTube policies are excluding and preventing Palestinians from their digital rights and right to express their opinions and different realities.
- (7) What are the recommended tactics, protective ways that content creators have to adopt in order to protect their content?

All data was transcribed, coded and categorized (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)⁴⁰ and the constant comparison methods were used to develop thematic categories in relation to the research objectives (Silverman, 2000).⁴¹ The process of coding and analysis through the derivation of themes was inductive and iterative, informed by grounded theory expectations of data analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)⁴² but also following Layder's (2005)⁴³ recommendation of engaging with both data and theoretical concepts. Thus, once the data was collected and transcribed, single words, descriptive phrases, or longer textual materials were assigned to emerging codes. Codes were then condensed into themes (Kvale, 2009).⁴⁴

³⁷ Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009) *Interviews; Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Los Angeles: Sage.

³⁸ Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. & Lowe, A. (1991) *Management Research: An Introduction*. London: Sage Publications.

³⁹ Carson, D. Gilmore, A. Perry, C. & Gronhaug K. (2001), *Qualitative Marketing Research*. London: Sage Publication.

⁴⁰ Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008) *Basics of Qualitative Research*, London: Sage.

⁴¹ Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

⁴² Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008) *Basics of Qualitative Research*, London: Sage.

⁴³ Layder, D. (2005) *Sociological Practice: Linking Theory and Social Research*, London: Sage.

⁴⁴ Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009) *Interviews; Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Los Angeles: Sage.

Limitations

This research faced several limitations, as it is common with any robust social theoretical enquiry. The most common limitation in this interpretivist qualitative research is the question of generalizability. Although the research is not looking to generalize the findings and results of this research but providing a deeper and richer understanding of YouTube policies and practices towards the Palestinian digital content on YouTube, the findings might be limitedly applicable due to the limited number of respondents.

First, the eleven respondents which were selected using the snowballing sampling technique (Bryman & Bell, 2007),⁴⁵ could be subjected to a higher tendency of selection bias. This research argues the possibility of the respondents recommending other respondents based on their personal network, geographic place, gender, and other subjective criteria. Although finding, and interviewing respondents who faced some issues with their digital content on YouTube was a challenging task, the chosen sample could be more expanded to allow more of the respondents' viewpoints and experiences, where diverse data and findings could be produced.

Second, access to resources, particularly time, is a constraint on most research. The data collection period lasted for two months, January and February 2020. If the researcher would have had longer time to conduct this research, new insights, categories and codes would have emerged to enrich this research.

Third, this research depends merely on qualitative methods to obtain data. Mixed methods of applying quantitative and qualitative methods, or triangulation methods of using multiple methods of collecting data, could enrich the research findings and its contributions more. Therefore, the researcher recommends future research to include more methods of collecting data while studying social media content or digital research topics. For example, experimental research of how YouTube policies and practices are employed on different Palestinian digital videos could bring more vivid findings and observations.

Fourth, the researcher attempted to contact YouTube management staff to better understand YouTube policies, terminations of videos, and how they apply their digital surveillance, however, this aim was difficult to achieve. Therefore, it could have been beneficial if the researcher could obtain any information about YouTube staff background or experiences, to better understand the mechanisms and dynamics of YouTube in dealing with violence, hate speech, or misleading digital content. Therefore, for future research, it is recommended to include industry experts from YouTube to better understand organizational structure, dynamics, and way of work.

⁴⁵ Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2007) *Business Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fifth, since the interview questions were asking about a past period of time which the respondents experienced with YouTube, the researcher posited that using interviewing would be a useful way of capturing the process and the impact of time. Therefore, the accuracy and completeness of recall bias are possible limitations of the findings. Possible problems occur due to faulty memories, oversimplifications and rationalizations, subconscious attempts to maintain self-esteem due to needs for acceptance, achievement and security, and social desirability. Drawing on Cox and Hassard's (2005)⁴⁶. Exploration of retrospective research methods, their limitations in producing an entirely 'truthful' picture of the past may not be of such concern if the researcher is concerned with the nature of reality from the position of the participant. The ontological position of this thesis was interpretive and thus emphasized the importance of participants' perceptions and interpretations of their previously lived realities. Therefore, if it happened that the researcher collected the data during the lifetime of YouTube actions of video deletion or channel termination, an ethnographic study would be more recommended.

Sixth, findings are dependent on the truthfulness of the data in which they are grounded and so the possibility that data collected from participants was not truthful must be considered. Although the researcher was fully aware and responsible for the participants' confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity, there is a certain degree of risk associated with political concerns which the respondents' face. Bringing activists under the spotlight and disclosing their activism on social media might expose activists/users to surveillance, as well as repression, and personal threats. Therefore, providing limited, short-cuts, and untruthful data must be considered.

Seventh, translating and transcribing the interviews from Arabic to English was not an easy task for the researcher. Some of the words, idioms and jokes were difficult to translate in the same native language sense of humor, fear, anger or sarcasm.

⁴⁶ Cox, J. W. & Hassard, J. (2005) Triangulation in Organizational Research: A Re- Presentation. *Organization*, 12(1): 109-133.

Research Findings and Discussion

After all data was coded and categorized (Corbin and Strauss, 2008),⁴⁷ the constant comparison method was used to develop thematic categories in relation to the research aim and objectives (Silverman, 2000).⁴⁸ The research team discussed these codes, and began to break down, examine, compare, conceptualize, and categorize the data to figure out concepts, which were later grouped and turned into categories. From the eleven interviews analyzed, we used the first-order arguments we discerned to distinguish 15 second-order themes, which map in turn to the four aggregate dimensions identified above, as can be seen from Table 2 (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013).⁴⁹ Definition of violence, discriminatory policies and practices, subjective/emotional experiences, and learnt tactics/protective techniques are the four main aggregate dimensions which are better explained and explored in the following section.

Table 2. Data, themes, YouTube’s content moderation, and discriminatory policies

Aggregate Dimensions	2nd Order Themes	Illustration 1st order data from respondents’ quotes
Definition of Violence	Violating the ‘non-violent’	The definition of violence varies and contradicts in many times
	Palestine as a ‘testing spot’ for YouTube	Personally, I think that Palestine could be used as a ‘testing spot’ for YouTube policies and practices to better define and adjust terms of conditions of violence for example.
	Arabic language	Through dealing with a lot of YouTube strikes and videos’ deletion, I think that the Arabic language is under higher surveillance from YouTube in comparison to other languages [...] in a way or another our videos that have Arabic titles or subtitles were under more observation from YouTube.
	Current Phobia / Time Discrimination	It was surprising to notice that YouTube was okay with videos of Palestinian martyrs’ photos or their funerals’ videos from the first and the second Intifadas [...] but were very keen to track any video which is related to recent Palestinian form of resistance, throwing stones, stabbing, demonstrating, etc [...] it is related to demobilizing the masses by deleting current visuals and videos.
Discriminatory Policies and Practices	Locative discrimination	I sent the same video which has been deleted from my YouTube account to my friend’s YouTube account in Europe [...] you make a kind of experiment, and YouTube was fine with it [...] YouTube just kept it.

⁴⁷ Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008) Basics of Qualitative Research, London: Sage.

⁴⁸ Silverman, D. (2000) Doing Qualitative Research. London: Sage.

⁴⁹ Gioia, D A, Corley K G and Hamilton A L (2013). Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology, Organizational Research Methods 16(1): 15–31.

	Hyper surveillance of influencers / Tracking popularity	After I published a YouTube video about a Palestinian boy throwing stones on an Israeli soldier while he is running...my YouTube channel got more subscriptions [...] after that incident, I noticed that YouTube has been observing and tracking my videos more and more. I got more than three strikes, and then after a while, YouTube blocked me from monetization and putting advertisements to gain money [...] I have hundreds of subscribers for nothing, money wise I mean.
Subjective/ Emotional Experiences	Discrimination and Isolation	Well definitely, you feel that YouTube policies are discriminating you as a Palestinian, or as an Arab, or as a Muslim sometimes [...] Why are there still plenty of violent videos running on YouTube? Is this fair nondiscriminatory policy?
	Exclusiveness	When they delete your video, they delete your story, narrative, and voice [...] they exclude your particular story from the mainstream news and policies.
	Anger and Disappointment	You feel upset and angry for sure [...] and you start posing questions like why me? Why my video? What is wrong about it? How does it truly violate the terms of YouTube?
	Demotivation on YouTube Activism	After YouTube blocked my channel monetization, I felt that I cannot benefit out of my popular channel like other YouTubers can [...] I truly got disappointed and unmotivated to be an active YouTubers.
Learnt Tactics Protective Techniques	Unused keywords/ Lexicon Development	As you are a YouTuber, you become more experienced with YouTube policies and tactics of surveillance [...] through time I developed a YouTube lexicon [...] for example, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, etc. are keywords which will be highly flagged out.
	Blurring Technique	Some of the tactics that I started to use are blurring some items within the video, such as Hamas or Hezbollah flags.
	Back-ups - Moving to Different Platforms (Daily Motion, Vimeo)	As a human rights advocate and activist I highly encourage all activists, in particular YouTubers, to have their videos back-ups, and maybe try other alternatives such as vimeo and daily motion [...] Bombozila by the way is an interesting example in this context. Bombozila is an independent Portuguese online platform to access documentaries and videos about social struggle and popular resistance, which YouTube might delete.
	Following up and digital human rights activism	Ignore the deletion of your video, and forget about it, is what they [referring to YouTube] want. We have to keep advocating and fighting for our rights and digital rights.

Definition of Violence

Collected data from the qualitative interviews revealed that the participants have problematic issues how YouTube defines what is violent and what is not.

According to Majd, YouTube has violated his right to reflect what truly happened with a Palestinian child in one of the Palestinian villages. With sorrow, he said: *“YouTube understands what violates its terms and conditions, not what violates the ordinary people [...] why do I need YouTube if I cannot report the violations which the Palestinians and the Palestinian kids in particular, are daily facing?”*

Another current example of YouTube double-standard policies and practices was mentioned by another respondent who was the editor chief of AlQuds News Net. Yazan said: *“Violence varies according to YouTube. For example, when YouTube sees a video of a Palestinian toddler killed by Israeli Army, they have issues with publishing it, but they are fine with promoting Israeli militarization and videos of Israeli kids trained to shoot with guns.”*

One of the videos which the former respondent referred to was a YouTube video that shows the extent of Israeli militarization of Israeli children.⁵⁰ Therefore, the data collected reflected the concerns that the respondents have regarding YouTube policies of defining what is violent content and what is not.

Moreover, the human rights activist at Witness organization, Noor, shared her fears and doubts that Palestine could be highly exploited as a ‘testing spot’: *“Personally, I think that Palestine could be used as a ‘testing spot’ for YouTube policies and practices to better define and adjust terms of conditions of the ‘Violent or graphic content’ for example.”*

The interview with the senior campaigner at Article 19 explored the vagueness in YouTube policies, Barbara said: *“If you look at YouTube community standards you will notice that many of these policies and standards could be used to take off your content [...] not only one policy could be applied actually many [...] for example, if your video not under the violent or graphic content, it could be deleted under the harmful or dangerous content.”* Gabrielle who is another member at Article 19 added: *“Definitions on YouTube are not clear [...] terrorism for example is defined differently according to YouTube, as some of the human rights defenders were considered terrorists.”*

Moreover, a Palestinian journalist and activist who is an active YouTuber added a crucial observation and evidence. Ahmad’s personal YouTube channel has 5930 subscribers, with around 703 videos: *“Through dealing with a lot of YouTube strikes and videos’ deletion, I think that the Arabic language is under higher surveillance from YouTube in comparison to other languages [...] in a way or another our videos that have Arabic titles or subtitles were under more observation from YouTube.”*

⁵⁰ Haaretz (May 14 2014) Photographs of Independence Day Celebrations throughout Israel. Retrieved from: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/1.2313968>

Through interviewing and speaking with him more, he shared another observation about YouTube, discriminating current Palestinian videos more than historic ones: *“It was surprising to notice that YouTube was okay with videos of Palestinian martyrs’ photos or their funerals’ videos from the first and the second Intifada [...] but were very keen to track any video which is related to recent Palestinian form of resistance, throwing stones, stabbing, demonstrating, etc [...] it is related to demobilizing the masses by deleting current visuals and videos.”*

Discriminatory Policies and Practices

The second aggregate dimension focuses on the dynamics and ways in which YouTube discriminates the Palestinian content. Through data collected, the respondents revealed different dynamics of discrimination against the Palestinian content on YouTube.

Walid, who is a journalist reflected the anti-Palestinian, pro-Israeli, ties which many social media companies have. He expressed: *“Yes we [referring to the Palestinians] are targeted from multiple social media platforms, we cannot deny this. Look at the collaborations between Google, Facebook and the Israeli side, it’s massive and scary.”*

Another discriminatory practice which was revealed out of the collected data is what this research entitled as ‘locative discrimination’. Ahmad has witnessed that YouTube’s surveillance learning machines are designed and operationalized to keep an open eye on any content coming out from the geographic location of historic Palestine. Through a simple online experiment, the respondent revealed: *“I sent the same video which has been deleted from my YouTube account to my friend’s YouTube account in Europe [...] we did a kind of experiment, and YouTube was fine with the video being published from a European country [...] cynical, right?”*

The previous data from Ahmad was touched upon by Barbara, Article 19 member, Barbara elaborated: *“It is a question of implementation regarding YouTube. We know very little how the data is treated, how the algorithms are developed [...] YouTube wont share such information [...] we also know very little about YouTube staff, how they are trained? Do they know about the context? How does the revision process go?”*

Moreover, Majd and Walid, raised an important dynamic that YouTube uses to keep a high-surveillance level against the Palestinian content when it got more viewed and started becoming more influential. Majd, a graphic designer at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and human rights defender at B’Tselem, narrated an incident which he faced with YouTube:

“After I published a YouTube video about a Palestinian boy throwing stones upon an Israeli soldier while he is running my YouTube channel got more subscriptions [...] after that incident, I noticed that YouTube has been observing and tracking my videos more and more often [...] even the old ones. I got more than three strikes, and then after a while, YouTube blocked me from monetization to gain money [...] I have hundreds of subscribers for nothing, money wise I mean.”

Another similar incident which has similar patterns in discriminating popular Palestinian content of YouTube, was Walid's incident. This journalist recorded a precious video of Ahed Tamimi in Nabi Salih in the occupied West Bank in the Palestinian territories.⁵¹ In the video which Walid recorded, Ahed was demanding the Israeli soldiers to return her brother back who was arrested by the Israeli army. This video got more than 31,896,271 views on YouTube which boosted the journalist's YouTube channel to reach 76.3K subscribers. He narrated:

"After this video went viral on YouTube, I started to notice that some YouTube channels have stolen the video and titled it under subtitles like 'look how the Israeli Army is nicely treating the violent Palestinian kids' or 'Palestinian parents push their kids to provoke the Israeli soldiers' [...] I got very angry and I started to track all the channels which stolen my video [...] I reported to YouTube saying that I have the copyrights of this video and it has been uploaded illegally and in a misleading way [...] it took YouTube a while to positively interact with my request [...] but the strange case was with the [IDF YouTube channel](#) which also used my video illegally. YouTube hasn't deleted the video, but I kept writing to them, explaining the case, and asking for my legitimate rights. At the end they deleted the video."

Subjective and Emotional Experiences

The qualitative interview which had been conducted with the eleven respondents devoted a space to ask about the respondents' subjective experiences as Palestinian activists, journalists, and human rights defenders. Findings highlighted several emotional and subjective experiences such as the feeling of being discriminated against and isolated/excluded from a dominating power, in addition, of feeling angry, disappointment and unmotivated to keep being active on YouTube.

Ahmad expressed: *"Well definitely you feel that YouTube policies are discriminating you as a Palestinian, or as an Arab, or as a Muslim [...] Why are there still plenty of violent videos running on YouTube? Is this a fair non-discriminatory policy which YouTube is truly implementing? I doubt it!"*

The feeling of exclusiveness was expressed by many respondents. Khalid shared: *"When they delete your video, they delete your story, narrative, and voice [...] they exclude your particular story from the mainstream news and policies. They exclude you."* Moreover, subjective experiences of anger, outrage, and frustration were revealed across several interviews. Majd said: *"You feel upset and angry for sure [...] and you start posing questions like why me? Why my video? What's wrong about it? How is it truly violates the terms of YouTube?"*

⁵¹ Samer Nazzal (November 2, 2012) 2012. عهد التميمي - طفلة فلسطينية تواجه جنود الاحتلال - النبي صالح. Retrieved in (January 20, 2020), from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWlxLq-2RQA>

The accumulation of negative feelings and experiences which many respondents felt, have unmotivated some of them of being active on YouTube, as Walid expressed: *“After YouTube blocked my channel monetization, I felt that I can not benefit out of my popular channel like other YouTubers can [...] I truly got disappointed and unmotivated to be an active YouTubers.”*

On a different level, the feminist interviewees Maha and Iman, have experienced online hate speech against them as women, what is referred to as ‘online misogyny’. As discussed previously, misogynistic speech content has spread rapidly after some Palestinian women, and feminists, have protested in August 2019 after the dramatic murder of Israa Ghayeb. After thousands of Palestinian women marched in different Palestinian cities in a campaign called Tal’at ‘coming out’, many misogynistic posts on YouTube have been posted. Iman said with sorrow: *“It was such a pity and disgrace to see how our people, who are suffering from the same pain, defame you online and describe you badly.”* Maha added: *“Comments on YouTube weren’t defaming and denouncing us per se, but the movement as a whole, but still, I felt it personal as this movement expresses me, as many females and males in our society.”*

Learnt Tactics and Protective Techniques

Regarding the negative subjective and emotional experiences which many respondents felt, many of them expressed different ways of resisting YouTube discriminatory practices against their content. Walid shared his thoughts: *“Rule number one should be for us is to stand for our digital rights and not to maneuver with YouTube policy of discrimination and exclusiveness.”*

Other respondents shared learned tactics to protect their videos from deletion. Ahmad’s learnt tactic was similar to developing a lexicon of words and keywords: *“As you are a YouTuber, you become more experienced with YouTube policies and tactics of surveillance [...] through time I developed a YouTube lexicon [...] for example, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, etc.. are keywords which will be highly flagged out.”* He also added: *“Some of the tactics that I started to use are blurring some items within the video, such as Hamas or Hezbollah flags.”*

Moreover, most of the respondents agreed that back-ups of the videos are highly required under YouTube high surveillance of the Palestinian digital content, in addition, of using alternative platforms like YouTube. Noor, the human rights activist at Witness organization said:

“As a human rights advocate and activist I highly encourage all activists, in particular YouTubers, to have their videos back-ups, and maybe try other alternatives such as Vimeo and DailyMotion [...] Bombozila by the way is an interesting example in this context. Bombozila is an independent Portuguese online platform to access documentaries and videos about social struggle and popular resistance, which YouTube might delete.”

Moreover, Yazan's long-standing experience with reporting to YouTube to defend his digital copyrights, has taught him a beneficial lesson which he shared by saying:

"Ignore the deletion of your video on YouTube, and forget about it, is what they [referring to YouTube] want. We have to keep advocating and fighting for our actual rights and digital rights [...] my experience with YouTube taught me not to give up, to keep reporting, explaining my case, write long letters in a professional way to prove my copyrights."

Recommendations

This section offers a list of recommendations, some of which were raised by the research respondents, and others which have been extracted from the research review. These recommendations are relevant for official authorities, civil society organizations, YouTube company, Palestinian YouTube users, Tech companies, human rights activists and defenders, social media users in general, as well as academics and researchers.

YouTube

- Uphold their terms of service in a non-discriminatory manner and ensure that their activities do not contribute to the human rights abuses of the Palestinian population.
- Provide equal access to information from YouTube and ensure that YouTube community guidelines are available, with full clarifications, in official UN languages including Arabic.
- Clarify YouTube community guidelines and policies and announce the official source of their human rights legal standards.
- Ensure that there is not hypersurveillance of Palestinian content or discrimination against Palestinian content or translating things related to Palestine in a way that suppresses Palestinians right to freedom of expression and protects Palestinians' right to self-determination.
- Publish transparency reports about requestions, deletions, blocks or restrictions of content and profiles of Palestinian users. Publish the number of requests to restrict content per actor, the number of requests approved, the reasons for approval or rejection of requests.
- Users are notified when there is an intent to restrict or delete content and accounts with a clear explanation of the reasons for taking such measures.
- Users must have the right and method to challenge decisions when their content is removed. This means that content taken down in error or unjustly, will have a second chance to be reviewed– and the right to expression restored.
- YouTube must clearly explain how a person can appeal the decision and give a reasonable response timeline with contact details for more information.
- YouTube should proactively publish data on the number of content removals, types of flaggers , reasons for removal, how many appeals they receive and the outcome of the appeals.

Governmental Level

- governmental level should be conditioned to respect digital human rights of expression.
- Laws must be reformed to ensure that states advocate for the protection of Palestinian content on different social media platforms, and YouTube in particular.
- governmental level should develop an independent accountability mechanism to monitor and address hate speech, harassment, or defamation against affected communities both online and offline.
- governmental level should support lawsuit cases and assign lawyers to help the disadvantaged and affected YouTube users.
- Third parties should withhold funding for any governmental plans which do not guarantee the protection of digital content rights and freedom of expression.

About 7amleh Center

7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media is a non-profit organization focused on protecting the human rights of Palestinians in the online space. Our programmes build the capacity of Palestinians to safely access the internet, run effective digital campaigns and advocate for digital rights and human rights. 7amleh's team works across Jerusalem, Gaza, the West Bank and Israel and regularly cooperates with local and international partners.

Trainings & Workshops: Working with civil society organizations, grassroots initiatives, media professionals, human rights defenders and activists to strengthen their digital security, campaigning and digital campaigning capacity. 7amleh has trained hundreds of people in Palestine and throughout the MENA region in digital security, digital campaigning and storytelling.

Campaigning: Coordinating and managing public campaigns, utilizing digital resources, on various issues related to Palestinian rights. Campaigns include research reports, infographics, videos and other materials. One of our most successful online campaigns in 2019, was focused on gender based violence online and organically reached 1,000,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem, Israel and the West Bank.

Research & Advocacy: 7amleh works with civil society to develop evidence-based advocacy strategies to change the policies and practices of governmental organizations and technology companies. On a weekly basis we monitor digital rights violations including arrest, content takedowns, hate speech and surveillance among other issues impacting Palestinians. In 2019 we published research focused on the right to access economic markets, freedom of expression for youth and the digital occupation of the Palestinian ICT Infrastructure.

Palestine Digital Activism Forum: On an annual basis 7amleh hold a weeklong conference (in 2020 it was digital in response to coronavirus) to enhance multi-stakeholder dialogue with members of government, private sector, civil society and educational institutions among others. More information about PDAF can be seen at the www.PDAF.ps website.



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