Digital Literacy: A Palestinian Refugee Perspective

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to explore digital literacy in the specific context of the Palestinian refugee community in the Middle East by looking at the cultural specificity of digital literacy theorising and practice, by analysing current digital education policy in the countries hosting the Palestinian refugee community, and by documenting the digital environment of the Palestinian refugee. It identifies the distance or deficit between the community's current access to digital literacy education, appropriately defined, and its digital environment, needs and opportunities. Finally, the paper provides a brief agenda for further empirical research.

Keywords

1. Introduction and Rationale

We should start with a definition of digital literacy, a provisional definition as a point of departure. A very comprehensive, abstract and generic definition of digital literacy, devised merely for the current discussion, might be 'those skills, abilities and attitudes that enable people and communities to survive, flourish and grow in an environment that is increasingly digital'; a rather different and pragmatic definition might portray digital literacy as filling the gap between educational provision and digital environment. These are unlikely to be culturally neutral (some other authors illustrate this point in MENA, Melki, 2013; Jewels & Albon, 2013, and elsewhere, Thatcher, 2009;), no definition ever will be, and that issue is the crux of this paper. Digital literacy is clearly not the same everywhere since the digital technology in use, the cultural practices and the economic activity all vary from culture to culture, from country to country, and from region to region. We argue that the idea of digital literacy has not been developed, discussed or defined sufficiently in the education systems of the Middle East and that this paper will help to document the nature of the digital opportunities, the digital challenges and the digital resources facing Palestinian refugee communities, and thus support a specifically Palestinian conception of the theory and practice of digital literacy. As we know more about these, we can begin to develop ways in which policy-makers, trainers, teachers and educators can respond in the classroom and in the community.

This paper grows out of the author's academic and professional work in the region, primarily with UNRWA (2010), explained later, and with the British Council and universities in Jordan and the West Bank, also mentioned later. It is only a preliminary work to scope out how research work might explore discrepancies between the digital environment, the digital opportunities and the current educational policies and the strategies to address them. Constraints, conditions and resources in the region do however militate against timely, rigorous and comprehensive fieldwork especially given the complex and rapidly evolving phenomena.

In this paper, the 'Palestinian refugee community' is broadly defined, to quote UNRWA's mandate, as the community of people whose "normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict."[1]. UNRWA also provides services to "refugees and people displaced by the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1967 and subsequent hostilities"[2], and in practice this means its geographical remit is Jordan, Gaza and, West Bank, Syria and Lebanon, the five Fields (Al Husseini & Bocco, 2009). Clearly, we are making generalisations about the composition and characteristics of the Palestinian refugee community even as limited to definitions used by UNRWA. There are differences and divisions across and within the communities - their legal rights and responsibilities, for example, in owning property are different; some live in camps whilst others live in towns and so on. The aim here is however to explore the implications for educational policy. What might be a simplification or generalisation in purely academic terms might nevertheless still be the basis for policy formulation or professional practice. If the needs, behaviour or attitudes of 'conservative' Palestinians are being addressed, whatever that might mean, then the needs, behaviour and attitudes of 'progressive' or 'liberal' Palestinians are also being addressed because the latter are embraced by whatever covers the former, implying that we need only worry for practical purposes about the bounds or the limits.

(It is worth noting in the context of the current wider interest in refugees, that the basis for the UNRWA definition is very different from that of UNHCR; the former seems almost hereditary, whilst the latter is defined by circumstances[3] and these can change and possibly improve. Strictly speaking, the definitions of IDP, internally displaced persons, are also relevant and the Palestinian refugee community in MENA inhabits much of the space geographical and political space as IDPs, especially in Syria. Refugees are the responsibility of UNHCR but IDPs are not protected by international law or eligible to receive many types of aid.)

The digital environments of Palestinian people and communities, whilst uniquely their own (Rabaya'h & Mansour, nd), also shares attributes and activities with many other parts of cyberspace, specifically those shaped by global neo-liberalism, corporatism and capitalism (Junka-Aikio, 2010). The more critical aspects of European digital literacy work elicit a well-documented response (Lally & Traxler 2016).

So, to reiterate, the paper grows out of concerns that the increasingly digital nature of all of our lives means that we need changed and increasingly digital skills, access, attitudes and opportunities in order to create, express, understand, explore, earn and flourish in our social, academic, economic, political and personal lives, amongst our families, friends, communities and colleagues. The digital technology that provides these challenges and opportunities does however embody language, values, gestures and culture is overwhelmingly Anglophone American and is largely under the control of global corporations and thus alien to many of the world's cultures and communities (Castells *et al*, 2009). This implies that empowering people and communities requires culturally specific and culturally sensitive definitions of digitally

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[1] http://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees, viewed 9th August 2016

[2] ditto

[3] "…someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group." (http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee/)

literacy, rather than appropriating those generated outside the region and outside the community. This is not however to imply that culturally specific and culturally sensitive definitions can adequately reflect and respond to the diversity, fluidity, complexity and contradiction within communities and individuals, only that such definitions might form a better basis for educational policy and practice. This would promote resilience and responses in the face of external challenges and conditions, from corporate, Anglophone and Western sources, alongside the growth of a robust indigenous digital culture.

Moreover, Palestinians in the five UNRWA Fields live in very specific circumstances, for example the blockade and siege of Gaza (Tawil-Souri 2012; Dahan, 2012), the war and displacement in Syria (Fagen 2009), the instability and unrest in Lebanon (Salem 2006; Sharp *et al.* 2006; Suleiman, 2006; Bortolazzi, 2011), the constant influx of different refugees and displaced persons in Jordan (Stephens 2016) and the occupation and control of Palestine (Newman 1989; Yiftachel, 2005; Tawil-Souri, & Aouragh, 2014) that suggest that very specific digital skills, attitudes and choices are needed (as are improved availability, ownership and control of infrastructure, devices, networks and services but these are not the focus of this paper). These might include the ability to learn from mobiles whilst stuck at military checkpoints (Shalan & Abdelnour, 2014), the need to access external online markets and crowd-sourced funding, the ability to maintain schooling during air strikes or curfews[4], the ability to preserve culture and language whilst accessing international online resources and communities, the need to build an online cultural identity as physical cultures are threatened, the ability to respond to Israeli control of spectrum and infrastructure (Tawil-Souri 2012) and the need for digital criticality in the face of internet radicalisation (Wright 2008).

2. Some Background to Digital Literacy Background

In order to explore the relationships between the Palestinian refugee community and the growing discussions of digital literacy, we will use the digital literacy agenda within UK higher education. This is not intended as a comparison or meant to imply a deficit, merely a way to identify concepts and themes. Several sources (Beetham 2010; Belshaw 2011; Jones 2016) review other European and international initiatives, programmes and endeavours that have run parallel to the UK discourses on digital literacy. This agenda has over the last five years been driven and articulated by the e-learning programme within JISC (previously the Joint Information Services Committee, now just Jisc)[5]. This has been an ambitious and coherent campaign to engage UK higher education, from grass roots teaching staff to university managements, in discussion, development and publication. This has led to a consensus about the kinds of attitudes, skills and capabilities that students will need to have to get the full benefit of the technology and resources available to support their learning, both initial and lifelong. Digital literacy has been defined as "the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this Process" (Martin,

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[4] UNRWA estimates that, in the last five years, 302 (or 44%) of all its schools have been directly impacted by armed conflict and violence, either causing physical damage to the schools or significantly disrupting education services. (UNRWA 2016)

[5] for example, http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/projects/elearningllida.aspx,
http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/46421608/Developing%20digital%20literacies,
http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/developingdigitalliteracies/developingdigitalliteraciesprog.aspx, all viewed 6th August 2016

2005:135). A pragmatic approach to definition identifies what we expect of these constituent capabilities, for example;

- "they are a pre-requisite or foundation for other capabilities;
- they are critical to an individual's life chances;
- they are essential to the making and sharing of culturally significant meanings;
- as a result, there is or should be a society-wide entitlement to these capabilities at some level." (Beetham 2010:1)

The programme has also documented the differing ways in which UK higher education institutions have defined and supported the acquisition of these skills and capabilities within their own mission and demographics, and has sponsored projects to promote further development, publication and dissemination.

A handful of observations will suffice for the current discussion. Firstly, the skills and capabilities related to the use, exploitation and potential of popular mobile devices are only a subset of this larger agenda. It is however recognised that they, the mobile devices, represent an increasingly significant part of a diverse and changeable ecology of the various digital technologies that might support learning but importantly a part where the loci of control and confidence has shifted away from lecturers within the temporal and spatial bounds of their institutions and towards their students, often outside the bounds of any institutions and amongst the wider population, nor merely institutional students. This shift means that supporting any meaningful institutional and formal digital literacy agenda transforms the roles and responsibilities of teachers and lecturers, expanding these from just being authoritative subject experts facilitating transmissive and discursive learning to include learning *with* or even *from* their students. We could anticipate our later discussion by noting how culturally specific this may be, and how challenging to some parts of Palestinian culture, with a more traditional and didactic conception of teaching (a conception shared by many UK academics). So *mobile* is only part of *digital* but outside Europe, in the Middle East for example, *mobile* is the most significant part and the part that most challenges traditional teacher roles. This is because access to the Internet and World-Wide Web is predominantly via mobile devices, and because the ownership of mobile devices is predominantly personal not institutional.

Secondly, the larger agenda represents an attempt to formulate a portfolio of comprehensive and generic attributes that might characterise graduates leaving colleges and universities in the coming years. The discussions within this emergent UK digital literacy community have resonated with other older discussions across the higher education sector about the nature of so-called *graduate attributes* or even *graduate-ness*, part of an attempt to pin down the broad but defining features of the UK university experience and the nature of its *added value*, and how it differs from training. All of these discussions have managed to define succinctly those attributes that relate to employment and employability but have struggled to be as precise about those other attributes that could characterise the digitally literate graduate in varied social, religious, civic, cultural, political and community settings. So developing a Palestinian digital literacy curriculum problematizes the role of higher education and the role of universities, in a way that resonates with discussions in the UK.

Thirdly, the digital literacy discussions have been informed and influenced by earlier discussions. Being digitally literate in the broadest sense implies making ethically informed choices and decisions about digital behaviour, for example about digital safety, digital rights, digital property, digital identity and digital privacy. There are also consequences, in defining

digital literacy, for definitions of *digital divides* (discussed unusually in an Arab context in Allagui, 2009) and notions of *digital inclusion,* moving away from an earlier emphasis on ownership or access. All of these have implications for ideas about entitlement and equity. Discussing digital literacy draws in many other issues. Digital inclusion is critically implicated in all other inclusion determinants since communication technologies operate as mediators to accessing and utilising online resources and services (Nansen *et al.*, 2013). These are quite culturally specific issues. UNRWA, the agency responsible for the education and health of the Palestinian refugee community, wholeheartedly espouses and enacts notions of inclusion and human rights in its work but there are occasions when these uncomfortably confront values in the more traditional Muslim communities; one can now imagine these situations being re-enacted in a digital context. Digital literacy is also a cultural attribute resting on the notions of literacy, learning, education and knowledge, local, albeit often tacitly, to a specific culture or sub-culture. One of the challenges for educators is the increasing fluidity and confusion as more cultures and sub-cultures emerge in cyberspace and phonespace, orthogonal to those in geographical space (Traxler, 2009; Kuntsman & Stein, 2011).

Fourthly, digital literacy discussions have been skewed or confused by the exact role and significance of basic IT skills. These are important attributes but because of their concrete and utilitarian nature, they are easy to define, perhaps at the expense of attributes that are more abstract or more fluid or more contentious. Other attributes can be grouped under the headings attributes and practices, and depend on access, creating a hierarchy of abstraction or dependencies.

Attribute	'I am…'
Practices	'I do….'
Skills	'I can …'
Access	'I have ...'

(Beetham and Sharpe, 2009)

Discussion of Palestinian digital literacy must meaningfully explore and embrace livelihoods and local labour market conditions and trends in the Middle East, alongside the higher abstractions and attributes. What is however significant in the European literature of digital literacy is the absence of much discussion about the balance or distinction between, on the one hand, compliance and conformity, and, on the other hand, criticality and activism, between merely understanding the digital situation and actively seeking to resist it or change it. Compared to most European or American contexts, this is a crucial difference for the Palestinian refugee communities in the region where these issues are starker and immediate.
Finally, the digital literacy discussions in the UK have also, however inappropriately, drawn on the terminology and literature of *digital natives* and *digital immigrants* (Prensky, 2001), implying that digital literacy may be a generational attribute. A more evidence-based classification, in fact a spectrum, runs between *digital visitors* and *digital residents* (White & Le Cornu 2011), attempting to use digital habits and attitudes as a way of understanding the extent to which digital technologies can underpin education and training by providing archetypes or personae that making reasoning about attitudes and behaviour more manageable. Whilst these categories might be loosely generational, they are also a function of local infrastructure, local culture and local history, and need reworking in different cultures and environments. Empirically developing similar archetypes within the context of the Palestinian refugee community would be a useful foundation for policy and practice.

We should add, much of this digital literacy debate in the UK has focussed on the idea of *digital identity* (and consequently on *digital community* and *digital culture*). These notions must necessarily play out differently in the cultures of the Middle East, specifically in relation to Muslim and Arab ideas (Mandaville 1999; Wheeler, 2002) – as opposed to Western and Christian ideas that formed their historical backdrop - about proprietary and decorum, and also play out differently within the Palestinian community, specifically the capacity of digital technology to preserve Palestinian culture (Tawil-Souri, 2009) amongst its beleaguered, embattled and dispersed physical communities. This is of course to generalise and over-simplify the various communities but illustrates aspects of the differences involved. Looking for evidence of this, one could explore the cultural differences as articulated by the work of Hofstede applied to various nations of the region (Hamdoun Al-Soufi, 2005; Alkailani *et al.*, 2012; Al-Amleh, 2014; 'Mustafa' 2011; Weishut, 2012) - the consensus depicts Arab culture as more hierarchic, static and conservative, more risk-averse and collectivist than many Western European societies but with the usual caveats about granularity, generations, gender, social class and the specifics of the Palestinian situation in the context of wider Arab norms. This is of course simplistic and essentialising but intended only as a starting point for policy-makers and educationalists, who might see culture as difficult to calibrate and discuss and thus better ignored. Many apparently successful pedagogic techniques, often embodied in educational technology, for example games-based learning, rest on implicit assumptions about teachers and learners that are culturally specific. As with many established ethical systems and codes of conduct, there is confusion and uncertainty about how these codes and systems apply to the digital world, the extent to which codes about appearance and visibility relation to digital images and even digital avatars. There is also, as experienced by the author whilst working in Gaza, a worry that this digital world is a Trojan horse for western (Christian) values.

It is worth making a comparison with similar Palestinian contexts. A recently launched EU Erasmus+ project, METHODS[6] comprises universities in the occupied West Bank, namely An-Najah National University, Birzeit University, Palestine Polytechnic University and Bethlehem University plus universities in Jordan, namely the University of Jordan, the Hashemite University, Jordan University of Science and Technology and Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan and EU partners. The object of the project is to introduce more TEL (technology enhanced learning) into local universities and thus *modernise* teaching and learning. The project has begun only recently but already it is unclear whether *modernise* will in practice mean *Westernise* and whether *modernise* will mean Westernise according to notions of TEL prevalent in the Western universities of the 1990s. These two examples, Gaza and METHODS, exemplify potential extremes as Palestinian educators confront digital technology – to unthinkingly reject it or to unthinkingly accept it – and point to the need for a critical digital literacy curriculum developed within the Palestinian community, able to build on the underlying principles.

3. Digital Literacy and Arab Culture

Attitudes to digital literacy framed in the way we are describing, including criticality, originality, creativity and expression, derived from Western values of individual self-expression, have the potential to confront the attitudes to criticality, originality, creativity and expression that inform Palestinian and regional culture, and its institutions. *Times Higher*

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[6] http://www.wlv.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/cedare---centre-for-developmental-and-applied-research-in-education/funded-research-projects/current-education-research-projects/methods-project/ viewed 6th August 2016

Education (THE 2015a) reported on other aspects of this, in universities and in intellectual life,

> *'Muslims need to steer a path between two opposing dangers when it comes to higher education and science. One is the "lame duck" mentality, which frames answers to questions "only in terms of 'catching up' with Western models of knowledge production, professionalism, quality assurance, critical thinking, research, liberal arts" and so on. The opposite trap is "the 'cosy corner' mentality, which prefers to occupy a parochial corner in which everything which is not explicitly 'Islamicised' is seen as threatening or deviant".'*

A specifically Palestinian digital literacy curriculum, the prerequisite for effective digital learning, must also recognise the concrete specifics of the Palestinian learner's environment; a visiting British academic working at Birzeit University observed of students,

> *Those who failed to do their course reading were usually not apathetic, but had had their lives profoundly disrupted by checkpoints, arrests in the family, demonstrations dispersed by tear gas or even the violent deaths of friends. (THE 2015b)*

Other research (Buckner & Kim 2012) identifies similar stresses and their educational impact but promotes gaming as a means of improving the *executive functions* that are undermined by the environmental stress. One element of a Palestinian digital literacy might be the contribution of digital technology to a very local notion of psychological well-being. There is however still a literature that treats ICT as globally standardised, apolitical and culturally neutral (eg Shraim & Crompton, 2015; Shraim & Khlaif, 2010, Khlaif 2017)

A recent study (Aouragh 2008) offers an insight into the increasing role of the internet for Palestinians in the diaspora and studies the effects of these practices within the context of occupation and exile. Online political activism fills an important gap for what is absent offline. Through multi-site fieldwork (Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan) this research demonstrated how the internet gave birth to a Palestine identity in cyberspace and has altered the traditional tactics of activists. Online communication has strengthened social and political agency (Yerousis *et al.,* 2015) and evoked a new type of media activism. This has been an important development considering the stereotyped portrayals of Palestinians trapped in either terrorists or victims. Other studies explore the place of mobile technologies in the lives of local people (Hijazi-Omari & Ribak, 2008) and are very much part of the growing literature of mobility (Urry, 2007).

In the course of developing the UNRWA ICT Strategy, there were consultations and workshops, attended by teachers and advisors from the five Fields and intended to collaboratively develop a Strategy built on a shared understanding of basic contextual factors. In one workshop organised by the author in Amman in December 2013, the fifty-odd participants worked on, 'what is Palestinian digital culture, what is digital identity for Palestinians, what is the digital world that Palestinians inhabit?' A complex and emotional plenary discussion followed with questions from participants that ranged from, 'did digital media represent an arena to consolidate, preserve, disseminate and promote Palestinian identities and culture?' to, 'was the idea of a Palestinian digital culture and identity merely a second-rate substitute and palliative for a physical culture and identity (in the absence of a *real* Palestinian state)?' This represents only one dimension of the complex relationship Palestinians have with the internet; other have formed part of the *cyber intifada* (Aouragh, 2003), "It cannot be overstated how important the social impact of Internet is when physical contact is impossible." (43)

A recent BBC broadcast, *The battle of the e-Muftis*, subsequently summarised online[7], emphasised the role of digital media in the radicalisation of young people in the Middle East and documents attempts from within the Jordanian religious establishment to fight this radicalisation. Earlier pieces, for example *How the battle against IS is being fought online*[8], give some background to the IS media campaign and quote Shiraz Maher from Kings College London, having conducted the most comprehensive studies so far of the online activity of jihadists in Syria, as follows,

> This is the most socially-mediated conflict in history," he says. "You literally have thousands of foreign fighters from all over the world using social media in order to convey the message about the jihad that they are fighting.

Elsewhere in a piece entitled, *Isis and what it means to be modern*[9], BBC journalist John Gray makes the point that,

> Isis makes effective use of the internet to broadcast the brutal manner with which it deals with anyone judged to be an enemy. Isis's savagery isn't impulsive. Everything suggests it's a strategy developed over a number of years. When it posts videos of people being beheaded or shot, Isis advances several of its goals - simultaneously inspiring dread in its enemies, teaching the communities it controls the dire consequences of departing from an exceptionally extreme interpretation of Islam and sowing chaos in the population as a whole.

The details and nuances of these remarks are clearly the worth significant research but our argument here is that indigenous critical digital literacy could be a key component in the response to internet radicalisation but only within a comprehensive digital literacy curriculum embracing skills, culture, ethics and learning. At the moment however, as we shall see later, the national educational policies of the region do not recognise or address this issue.

4. Arab Culture and Digital Technology

In discussing digital literacy and Palestinian culture, we must recognise that the relationships between digital technology, especially the near-universal mobile phone, and the language, behaviour and culture of specific communities, in this case the Palestinian refugee community, are complex and dynamic and in some respects the digital literacy agenda is an attempt to make these relationships more explicit and more transparent. Mobile phones, and other digital technologies, are not just dumb conduits or containers for language(s) and culture; they transform languages and thus culture. They do this by perturbing the balance between mother tongues, vernaculars, lingua franca, global power language within different specific communities; by creating or changing genres of writing, for example blogs, posts, tweets, pen-pal letters, graffiti, selfies, post-cards, birthday cards, shopping lists, newspapers and books; by transforming the balance between textual, graphical and audio content of language due to the relative *searchability*, specifically search engines and speech-to-text engines, altering the balance between forms and genres, making some more easy, some more difficult and by affecting the balance between the production, consumption of text and its various forms. This is taking place within the Palestinian refugee communities and any

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[7] (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-32697424)

[8] (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29535343)

[9] (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28246732)

definition of digital literacy and any digital literacy curriculum must recognise, explore and respond to the living nature of their culture and languages.

These observations must however be seen in the context of the global hegemony of US English, of US digital technology and of the prominence of American and European researchers and their universities in global rankings and prestige, and in our case, the relatively marginal status of Arabic, of Arab institutions and of Arab knowledge production. In relation to the Palestinian refugee community there is a need for empirical research to explore the exact impact of these facts.

We can identify aspects of the dynamics between language and mobiles. These are important because language, and the social interactions around it, are the basic substance of education and learning, and that education and learning are, in turn, basically the acquisition of new language, the language of the subject-domain, the language of the teacher, the language of the profession, the language of the school or college, the language of the learning and the language of the learned. Learning and education are processes of acculturation and identity transformation and language is the medium by which this happens and by which it is expressed.

The impact of mobile digital technology on these is pervasive, subtle and profound. We see the mental patterns and processes embodied in the US technology imposed on a global audience. At a superficial level, many operating system icons (egg timers, wristwatches, waste paper bins, filing cabinets, floppy disks and diaries) display a specific cultural and generational heritage. We see US gestures embodied in the gestural interfaces of smart phones. Understanding these is part of finding a balance between the global and the local, engaging with the global knowledge economy whilst defending local customs and traditions, and a critical digital literacy curriculum is crucial in this complex digital world.

At the simplest level, mobile handset technology also impacts on language. The specifics of any device alter how people express themselves and which language they use, in our case, opting for English not Arabic messaging because of bigger message sizes (ASCII vs Unicode), for US English not British English because of auto-correction and predictive text. In Arabic, due to the different number of characters available in an English and Arabic text message,

> *"While mobile users were once confined to multiple clicks on a numeric keypad to enter a single letter, they can now use predictive-text (T9) software and full "qwerty" keyboards on their phones, significantly affecting the style and content of their messages. Similarly, Arabic characters are only recently available on mobile phones, and users are no longer required to work around this gap through Romanized spelling, although research indicates that a majority still chooses to. The encoding of Arabic dialect in written form, however informal, has great implications for literacy and its perception in the Arab world; in a covert way, EMC is broadening the possibilities of what Arabic text can be. However, those who write in Arabic dialect must contend with the notion that the vernacular is less legitimate or refined than the more formal MSA." (Modern Standard Arabic)*

(Gordon 2011:5)

Similarly, users of speech recognition and dictation software, for Siri or Dragon Naturally Speaking, find a linguistic bias since some non-standard dialects of English are rendered more accurately than others and most other languages are not rendered at all. We see the balance between different forms of expression, English vs Arabic, Standard vs dialect, being perturbed by mobiles, and these represent the differential hurdles to learning with mobiles for

different communities, and point to a digital literacy that recognises the linguistic and cultural bias and distortion embodied in digital technology as the prerequisite for meaningful digital learning.

5. The Digital Curriculum of the Palestinian Refugee Community
This account of the digital curriculum of those countries hosting the Palestinian community draws on the preparatory work for the ICT Strategy of UNRWA. It is gives background to progress and problems in thinking about digital literacy in countries hosting the Palestinian refugee community and the wider policy context. UNRWA

> " is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions from UN Member States. UNRWA also receives some funding from the Regular Budget of the United Nations, which is used mostly for international staffing costs. The Agency's services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance and emergency assistance, including in times of armed conflict."

In education,

> "With 703 schools, 9 vocational colleges, 2 educational science faculties and 2 teacher-training institutes, [UNRWA] operate one of the largest school systems in the Middle East, with some half a million children enrolled. UNRWA students' literacy and levels of educational attainment are among the highest in the Middle East. Our programme has also been committed to maintaining gender parity, a benchmark [UNRWA] first achieved in the 1960s."[10]

The Education Department schools, and TVET centres and teacher-training centres (only in Amman and Ramallah), must each operate within the curriculum of the relevant host country. Given UNRWA's advocacy and adherence around UN goals, such as gender equality and freedom of speech, and the political and religious views of some host country governments, for example Hamas, the *de facto* government in Gaza, this is problematic. A useful starting point *is Information and Communication Technology (ICT) In Education in Five Arab States* (Dennis *et al.*, 2010), useful in its approach and general coverage and useful as both Jordan and West Bank are amongst the five states. After making general remarks about the increasing improvement, capability and availability of ICT across the region, within the context of vastly different levels of *per capita* income, the report makes the point we mention in this paper,

> The social movements that arose in 2011 in the Arab States have demonstrated the potential of ICT to play a catalytic role. Arguably, the Arab Spring ranks among the most significant informal ICT-assisted "learning" phenomena in 2011, whereby thousands of youth used social media – accessed via their mobile phones – as a space for self-identification, self-assertion, contestation and mobilisation around democracy, human rights and civil liberties ...
> (ibid:5)

The phrase *Arab Spring* may now seem increasingly problematic but the point being made is about the comprehensive nature of digital penetration in Arab societies, and the capacity of digital technologies to create and sustain communities in hitherto inconceivable ways (Zeid & Al-Khalaf, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Gillespie, 2013). This point is echoed in accounts of specific uprisings, for example the *Jasmine Revolution* in Tunisia (Wagner, 2011). The Arab Spring is however only one of the more recent manifestations of mobile

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[10] www.unrwa.org

social technologies to mobilise [*sic*] popular political discontent (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011).

Another report, *Understanding the Arab Digital Generation* (Sabbagh *et al.,* 2012), surveying over 3,000 digital users in nine countries including Lebanon and Jordan, defined an Arab Digital Generation (ADG), people aged 15 to 35 who are consistent users of technology - this is a *digital natives/digital immigrants* classification that needs much more data and greater critical analysis. This survey suggests that these young Arab Internet users number 10 million, rising to 13 million by 2014 - a rise of 11 percent annually, compared to only 7 percent for the world. Whilst the survey defines and represents the views and preferences of the region's digital elite, these views are nonetheless significant because they represent a growing segment of potential employers and employment and because they represent a demographic in the ascendant. In discussing the various social and cultural attributes and practices around ICT, the ADG report asserts that,

> *What is particularly striking is that although the ADG is the best educated and most ambitious generation the region has yet produced, it rarely uses the Internet for education purposes. This is not for lack of desire or interest from the ADG's side. We know that youth in the region are seeking more technologically enhanced forms of education that will help them obtain employment and fulfil their goals. Rather, the fault lies with the education sector, which thus far has not provided the access or the Arabic digital content that this demographic craves.*

The rest of the statistics, findings and observations are broadly in line with global expectations filtered slightly through local and regional cultural sensibilities and practices. The survey reports widespread dissatisfaction on education across the region and its current use of ICT, saying for example,

> - *29 percent believe the curriculum and teaching methods are poor*
> - *23 percent believe the quality of teaching staff is below par*
> - *29 percent believe the quality of education infrastructure (such as buildings, environment, classrooms, and equipment) is poor*
> - *40 percent believe that schools insufficiently prepare students for the job market'*

The report then makes the following recommendations,

> *'Digitize schools: First and foremost, governments must enact legislation and regulations to promote the adoption of technology in education. In addition, governments must enhance the education environment, by investing to connect schools to a secure broadband connection, and equipping classrooms with up-to-date, digitally driven learning tools and software. Nevertheless, technology is not an ingredient that policymakers can simply add to schools and expect to generate results. Rather, educators must understand its purpose to use it correctly to enhance learning. Along these lines, teacher training programs are essential. Before even turning to technology, the region must ensure that all teachers have the correct fundamental pedagogical skills in place. These include differentiated teaching and learning pegged to the needs of individual students, and continuous assessment. Once that foundation is in place, training can integrate advanced technology. To that end, all current teachers should undergo education technology courses designed and mandated by the school or government. For people currently studying to become teachers, education technology should be*

embedded into the training program. In addition, as with any organization, technology can drive efficiencies in school administration and management.

These are sweeping and unsurprising recommendations. There are further recommendations but they all make obvious points and do not address the specific Palestinian refugee community context nor make clear where the human and financial capacity will come from. Nor how its impact and effectiveness can be measured and monitored. The recommendations do not come from education specialists. They are quoted here to illustrate the somewhat simplistic expectations, pressures and prescriptions on policy makers in the countries of the region. The remarks about the nature of teaching are complicated by UNESCO statistics on teacher supply, observing that across Arabs countries there are ongoing teacher shortages and specifically, "Palestine will continue to face a teacher shortage until 2023, primarily due to the growing school-age population." (UNESCO UIS: 2013)

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, 2011) targets on education and other related indicators provide useful but not wholly straightforward and possibly quite naïve benchmarks for measuring and monitoring, namely,

Target 2. Connect all secondary schools and primary schools with ICT

1. *Proportion of schools with a radio used for educational purposes*
2. *Proportion of schools with a television used for educational purposes*
3. *Learner-to-computer ratio*
4. *Proportion of schools with Internet access, by type of access*

Target 7. Adapt all primary and secondary school curricula to meet the challenges of the information society, taking into account national circumstances

1. *Proportion of ICT-qualified teachers in schools*
2. *Proportion of teachers trained to teach subjects using ICT*
3. *Proportion of schools with computer-assisted instruction (CAI)*
4. *Proportion of schools with Internet-assisted instruction (IAI)*

These benchmarks are backward looking and not necessarily meaningful as personal, mobile and portable devices replace and displace computers as the global and regional ICTs *par excellence* and as digital literacy and global online resources replace dedicated instructional packages. They do however underline the discrepancy between the national policies and ideas represented by digital literacy.

6. e-Learning Strategies of Countries Hosting Palestinian Refugees

In Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, West Bank, Jordan and Gaza, education and health are the responsibility of UNRWA. Alignment with the e-learning Strategies of the host countries in the five UNRWA Fields is a constraint on any UNRWA Strategy - including various restrictions relating to access to secondary, tertiary and vocational education (Shiblak, 1996) Whilst UNRWA schools are constrained by host country regulations, Palestinians refugees (in the terms of the UNRWA definition) are not accorded equal rights with host country nationals, Jordan being regarded as the most benign of the five Fields.

6.1 Lebanon

The National Education Strategy in Lebanon Vision Document[11] talks about, "Education oriented towards the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for handling

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[11] http://www.opentech.me/~laes/upload/editor_upload/file/Vision%20Document%20%20English.pdf

information and intense use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)" (p1) in building a knowledge society. After considerable statistical and critical analysis, the Strategy does however state that, "Although the stated curriculum objectives have been rather ambitious and included building knowledge, attitudes, and skills for dealing with information and using it in learning, the curriculum content is limited in many aspects: 1) The curriculum is limited to information skills and does not stress the use of IT and communication in teaching other subject matter areas or in autonomous learning; 2) The current curriculum covers only grades 7-12 at the rate of one class period every week; and 3) Informatics as a subject matter is not assigned any weight in school evaluation or in official examinations." - there seems to be no ICT in the primary curriculum and various hurdles for example infrastructure, curriculum and training, mean progress is slow and uneven in the secondary curriculum. ICT does not inform any of the other strands of the Strategy explicitly and is thus seen in very limited terms.

A more recent document is Lebanon's *National Educational Technology Strategic Plan - July 2012: Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age.* This strategic plan defines the mission and purpose of using ICT in schools; it outlines the core beliefs of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) and its assumptions regarding how ICT can best improve teaching and learning; it guides government, donors, and other funders on key areas for potential investment and funding; it delineates critical activities needed to make the vision and goals for ICT for teaching and learning a reality for every Lebanese student; and it defines key terms and practices to assure standardized, uniform, and high-quality implementation of technology for teaching and learning. This plan marks a first step in Lebanon's journey toward technology integration in schools but is clearly aspirational and needs considerable resource and effort to operationalize.

6.2 Jordan

Jordan gets a good press for its use of ICT in the education sector, primarily because of the Jordan Education Initiative dating from 2003. It was a classic response to perceptions of the tensions between global trends and the national economic portfolio. The economic analysis and policy prescription will be familiar from elsewhere, for example Latvia or Ireland. One report (USAID 2008) identified,

> *"The four primary objectives of the JEI are as follows:*
> *1. Improve the development and delivery of education to Jordan's citizens through public-private partnerships, and in the process help the government of Jordan achieve its vision for education as a catalyst for social and economic development*
> *2. Encourage the development of an efficient public-private model for the acceleration of educational reforms in developing countries based on unleashing the innovation of teachers and students through the effective use of ICT*
> *3. Build the capacity of the local information technology industry for the development of innovative learning solutions in partnership with world-class firms, creating economic value that will lead to mutually beneficial business opportunities*
> *4. Leverage an environment of national government commitment and corporate citizenship to build a model of reform that can be exported to and replicated in other countries.*

None of these recommendations directly addresses change in education itself, only the processes and resources to bring it about. In the words of another account,

JEI was conceived as a fast track project first executed across a 100 specially selected 'Discovery Schools'. A small project management office (PMO) set up and, in consultation with the Ministries of ICT and Education, PMO developed a policy of holistic education change electronic content, teacher training and technology – all with a controlled change management process. This initial phase was intended to inform the future nationwide program and to demonstrate what can be achieved when the corporate sector work together in a holistic way with a government. (page 2 of an informal report from Cisco)

The details of resources, management and implementation are clearly unlikely to be relevant or transferable but the underlying philosophy, namely using exemplar schools to somehow drive wider transformation, is also problematic and assumes a clearly understood trajectory from innovation to policy via evaluation and evidence, and assumes resources ready for allocation. Parts of the USAID evaluation of JEI seem to assume that experimentation will ensure that innovation and thus change will just happen, and that only infrastructure and hardware are the barriers to increased learner engagement and activity. Looking at the USAID recommendations, it is difficult to disagree with them but they still leave major issues that must be addressed. The consequences for any digital literacy curriculum for Palestinians in Jordanian schools – or outside them – is a long way downstream of any current developments.

6.3 Syria

A reported talk by the Syrian Ministry of Communications and Technology and the Syrian Computer Society seemed to be outlining a proposed national ICT Strategy, not one solely for education, but suggesting such a strategy had not previously existed. This was in May 2006 in Beirut. The statistics given for Syria are comparable with neighbours in the region, for example Egypt, Algeria or Morocco but further progress is unlikely to have been made. A 2009 report, *eLearning in Syria[12],* reviewed practices, possibilities and provision in Syria but gave little sense of coordinated Strategy at a national level. An earlier report, *Strategic ICT Program for Social and Economic Development* (UNDP 2001), covered similar grounds in terms of analysis and recommendations. The only inferences possible were that the use of ICT in education, especially outside universities or private schools was likely to be patchy, badly supported and not progressive. The on-going civil and military violence and dislocation mean that even this may not be true.

6.4 Palestinian Authority of Gaza and the West Bank

The Palestinian Educational Initiative[13], dating from pre-2005, hoped for *quick wins* in the first six months followed by the first phase of mainstream implementation, and talks of,

"the enhancement of the future of education in the PNA through pedagogical techniques empowered by technology that catalyzes socio-economic development.

- *To improve the existing ICT utilization in the PNA education system and pave the way for the development of Knowledge Based Palestinian Economy through Public/Private collaboration*
- *To encourage innovation in the education system and throughout the Palestinian ICT industry by fostering a sustainable model of public/private partnership in an effective adaptation and use of information and communication technology in the education system*
- *To build the capacity of the PNA education, ICT and knowledge industry for the*

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[12] http://hamdaneducation.com/arabic/EPeJdocs/4th6.htm

[13] http://www.pei.gov.ps/english/introduction.html viewed 6th August 2016

development of innovative learning solutions in partnership with world class and local firms, creating economic value leading to mutually beneficial business opportunity.

- *To enhance a student centered learning process that provides skills, knowledge, and experiences that will lead to employment and an entrepreneurial mindset. "*

These are very high-level aspirations with a focus on economic transformation (though clearly one very specific model of economic transformation), based on,

a) *Adopting a participatory approach between relevant stakeholders to arrive at nation wide consensus*

b) *Adopting a partnership and collaboration approach between the private sector companies and the Palestinian government*

c) *Providing a menu of opportunities for the private sector to participate that leverages their expertise, resources, existing programs and products*

d) *Building on, benefiting from, and complementing similar regional initiatives; the Jordan Education Initiative is a success story of such an approach.*

e) *Emphasizing the PNA and the Ministry of Education's decentralization policy through enhancing the district capacity and capabilities in the implementation process*

The Ministry identified the following challenges in developing knowledge based learning environment:

- The need to arrive at a modular, scalable, and a relatively low cost of ownership solutions.
- The need to arrive at introducing a learning system that instils the self-supporting citizenship values to students and in the process enhancing the concept of life-long learning.
- The need to identify and prioritize the main components and actions within the initiative which will achieve the specified objectives in a sustained manner.

We see many useful ideas but the focus is on technology in various forms rather than addressing the attitudes, capabilities and competences needed to deliver rather than subvert "*constructivist approaches to learning*". Much of the detail has still to be developed. An introductory remark does however point out that,

> *One challenge to address is how to build the leadership and management capacity at the Ministry (Education and Telecoms/IT) and district level and provide them with ownership of the initiative at the early stages. Another challenge will be how to change teachers' and administrators' attitudes and understanding to enable them to facilitate learning to students beyond the traditional approach of the learning process through the introduction and management of e-learning.*

The Teacher Education Strategy in Palestine recommends, *"Use modern and promising methods in teacher education, including the case-based approach, video recording of different teaching practices, using technology, and e-learning in particular, using interactive cases in teaching, analyzing teaching and learning situations, and conducting research, mainly action research"*. Describing the situation in Gaza is more difficult. Hamas took control of Gaza in June 2007. The government school system and the education system were however not brought under direct Hamas control, unlike internal security. This may mean little or no progress on the development of education policy. A further hindrance is the Israeli

blockade and the state of the infrastructure. (UNRWA schools in Gaza do have computer labs and packages for learning Arabic and maths, and haphazard donations of computers.)

In relation to developing teacher capacity, a recent Palestinian report, *Improving the Quality of Education Programs for Higher Basic Stage – Social Sciences Major*, explored *inter alia* teacher education programmes and particularly focused on the provision, content and delivery of teacher education within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in order to improve the quality and relevance of teacher education programs provided by HEIs. This was in response to the findings of the Teacher Education Strategy (TES) that stated that pre-service teacher education programs were:

> *outdated and over-theoretical, with insufficient focus on the practicalities of actual teaching, inadequate teaching practice arrangements, and program delivery methods that help to perpetuate rather than prevent the continuation of traditional, teacher-centered, transmission-oriented, methodologies on the part of student teachers.*

The report proceeded to identify specify issues – including the only mention of digital literacy - that need attention amongst which is TEL. It recommended that,

> *the concept of digital literacy was introduced and the key descriptors contained in relevant taxonomies (Kay et al 2009, Jenkins 2006 and FutureLab 2011) examined in order to establish how digital literacy skills could be incorporated into teacher education courses.*
> *A focus on the use of mobile user owned devices for interaction with web-based technology in the absence of the widespread availability of institutional technology/ teacher/lecturer owned technology was considered.*

A warning about the implementation of policy comes from a Qattan Foundation study (Wahbeh 2011) exploring the educational reform in Palestine that began with the publication by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) of a five year-strategic plan (2008 – 2012). This imposed different expectations and understanding of roles amongst teachers, students and principals on one hand and, on the other, the Ministry offices with its supervisory system and operational offices. Findings suggest rather different perceptions:

> *"There seems to be a disconnection between participants' understanding of their roles, constructed through their everyday interactions, and MoEHE expectations, which are driven by the rationalisation procedures stipulated by the so-called 'means-ends' reform model. The processes of professionalisation, standardisation and testing which are the major characteristics of the reform seem to impose a more centralised system which is against the essence of the reform goal outlined in the strategic plan. Furthermore, this approach to reform is disenfranchising teachers from good quality and aesthetic teaching and learning opportunities and reducing the everyday practices of teachers and students to a set of technical and rationalised norms."*

In 2016 a set of Policy Papers were developed by the *E-learning project*, jointly undertaken by the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the Belgian Development Cooperation. The aim of the project was to introduce the use of ICT in school education in order to enhance student-centred learning and to allow students to acquire 21st Century Skills in Palestine. Three of the Papers were, Information and Communication Technology in Education (ICTE), Digital Educational Resources (DER) and mobile Learning (m-L) and one specifically on 21st Century Skills (21CS). The first three are necessarily focussed inwards on the school processes

but the last one explicitly mentions digital literacy but can only define by saying "Digital literacy is NOT just computer operational skills" (MoHE 2016:6) and saying little else. It does however say,

Technology and education are currently led by the so-called Western world. Although 21CS are ecumenical at a higher abstraction level, their implementations include principles and values which do not always take into account the sensitivities of each particular nation's traditions and values.

Adopting a 21CS framework should not mean blindly copying a foreign educational system, but it should offer a chance to benefit from it. A Palestinian version of 21CS can benefit from the inclusion of Arab and Palestinian traditions and values, whose richness and depth include creativity, collaboration, flexibility and adaptability; they provide models of global citizenship, problem-solving, and decision making. Religion includes personal responsibility. (MoHE 2016:11)

The status of the Papers is unclear – they are certainly not policy – but these paragraphs represent a significant milestone.

6.5 UNRWA

The draft ICT Strategy, in effect its e-learning strategy, does recognise the analysis in this paper and make recommendations accordingly but is still a draft awaiting final approval and will in any case be constrained by the acute financial crisis afflicting UNRWA, by the general contextual factors described in this paper and by the requirement to operate its schools within the curriculum framework of the various host countries. (There are also large number of schools, for example those of NGOs and missionary societies, outside both UNRWA and the respective national systems, adding the complexity.)

6.6 Summary

It proved possible to access the relevant strategy documents from the host countries. These raised several important questions,

- What is the state of ICT in Education Strategies in the region? What constitutes such a Strategy?
- What if anything is the discrepancy between the Strategy and the delivery or implementation?
- What is the place of digital literacy in these policies intended to inform formal learning and ICT?

Taking these in turn, the ICT Strategies in host countries were generally not mature or sophisticated, and ICT is often implicit or embedded in national educational policy; the ICT Strategies were seldom concrete or specific, and were a poor guide for the allocation of resources or priorities. They were not generally the expression of any clear vision or values (though this may be because they blur and disguise differing and divergent visions and values in order to achieve a consensus). There was not a clear mechanism from experimentation via evidence to sustainability and no lead on innovation and strategy. In terms of teaching, the ICT Strategies seemed implicitly conservative, seeking to improve existing practices or to transform them only haphazardly and the place of digital literacy is minimal and marginal.

Secondly, most Strategies give some contextual constraints and some historical background, define some broad vision and outline some recommendations. Their failure is often to focus on expenditure and on required infrastructure at the expense of building and retaining the human capacity, the key to any digital literacy curriculum since it is about living in the actual

digital world as it is, not spending towards a different one. Furthermore, there is a failure to recognise the changing nature of the outside world, technologically and economically, and a failure to map aspirations onto the specifics of regional culture, expectations and traditions. The ICT Strategies are in many respects a deficit model, addressing perceived shortcomings compared to standards of provision in Europe or America and making few observations about the nature of Arab culture or Palestinian culture, however simplistically, and how it might represent an important ingredient of any analysis. The ecosystem, meaning the people, structures, values, organisations, transactions that encompasses experimentation, evaluation, evidence, policy change, resource allocation and attitudinal shift are absent even in the most philosophical sense as are mechanisms for recognising and responding to change. The digital literacy curriculum should be seen in the context of lifelong learning, of continuing to learn after compulsory and formal education and towards individual interests and aspirations, freed from the digital media and systems of compulsory, formal education.

Thirdly, it is difficult to reach a judgement about the likely discrepancy between strategy and delivery. The strategies are difficult to locate, inconsistent in format and rapidly obsolescent in the changing political situation. Accounts of the subsequent delivery are patchy and partial and so it is extremely difficult to learn anything. Strategy and delivery are not discrete or separate issues. These observations reveal the distance between the experiences of learning for many of the Palestinian refugee communities and of any adequate and appropriate digital literacy concepts and curriculum. Caution and scepticism are needed if local initiatives and aspirations are not to be judged by global, European or American standards and achievements, leading to strategies and policies framed in the context of *catching up*, of addressing perceived inadequacies and deficits. Given the ubiquity of the digital technologies of US corporations, the hegemony of US English in the global knowledge economy and the sophistication and diversity of European work on these topics, this must be a significant concern but the most recent document (MoEHE 2016) does raise the issue however briefly.

7. Conclusion

This paper outlines the ambitions and objectives encapsulated in the ideas of digital literacy and critiques assumptions that the digital environment is global, homogeneous, neutral or benign; it documents the current national digital education policies in the region and exposes their lack of any currently adequate policy, strategy, resources or curriculum to develop or deliver a digital literacy curriculum. The paper attempts to create a bridge between academics and researchers analysing the situation in the region, academics and officials working on educational policy and practice and researchers and developers involved in educational technology. There is clearly a gap between what is provided (by educational systems and policies) and what is needed (by people and communities) - external models and existing practices give a very general outline of what might fill this gap but the specifics are local and contingent. In order to make this a more realistic possibility there is the need for a research agenda that will comprise:

- Fieldwork amongst Palestinian refugee communities to give greater authenticity, granularity and precision to descriptions of their world, and correspondingly, a more detailed exploration of the digital opportunities, educational, cultural, political and economic, that they might access
- The development and deployment of techniques that give an accurate, timely and authentic account of the evolving digital practices of Palestinian people and communities, specifically techniques that are culturally appropriate; these adjectives

are however chosen with care and encapsulate a considerable methodological challenge

- Systematic reviews of the literature, firstly, of the region and its communities to seeking greater clarity and precision on the digital environment, on the changing impact, opportunities, activities and barriers in the digital world and beyond, and, secondly, of the digital literacy literature, for insights, concepts and methods from outside the Anglophone university sectors.

These are only scoping measures but they might help educators close the gap discussed in this paper. In the longer-term, of course, we hope to see a vibrant and active community growing in the region committed to taking these issues forward.

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