



Effects of Covid-19 on the Palestinian Cultural Scene and Assessment of the Digital Environment in Palestine

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Introduction

Over the past two years, the coronavirus pandemic has dramatically altered the planet that we live on and provoked drastic changes in all aspects of people's lives: socially, economically, culturally and of course, with respect to their physical and mental health. There have been around 4.5 million deaths worldwide since the beginning of this pandemic in December 2019 and over 200 million cases¹ in less than two years, as daily cases continue to rise, even after almost 30% of the world's population has been fully vaccinated².

Economically, all sectors have been damaged by this pandemic, including tourism, culture, global trade, agriculture, education, industrial production, and many others. This, in turn, has strongly affected people's income, especially in developed countries. There is as of yet no clear final assessment of GDP losses globally, since the pandemic is ongoing, but significant GDP shrinkage has been measured worldwide.

In general, the pandemic has increased levels of income inequality, with millions of people losing their jobs and falling into poverty due to high unemployment rates³. In addition, this current crisis has forced many governments to spend more of their budgets on the health sector, enforcing lockdowns and increasing restrictions on movement over intermittent periods in the last two years.

As with other sectors, the cultural sector has been drastically affected on a global scale, some studies showing it to have been the most impacted by the pandemic, along with the tourism sector⁴. This is due to the fact that "the more physical presence and social interaction are central to the cultural experience, the more badly hit it will be"⁵.

Culture and art are not only integral socially, but also economically: arts and culture were forecasted in 2018 to contribute to global GDPs by almost 10%⁶ in the following years, and cultural and creative industries provide nearly 30 million jobs worldwide⁷. Throughout this ongoing pandemic, studies show a conservative estimation of 10 million job losses in the cultural and creative industries across the world⁸, and a significant decline in funding for cultural activities and programs globally, which negatively impacts the GDP contribution of this sector.

On a social and civic level, culture plays a significant role in personal and societal empowerment and contributes directly to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a bid to promote prosperity. It also contributes on other levels by creating a safe environment for many social groups,

¹ Official statistics: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

² <https://news.google.com/covid19/map?hl=en-US&state=7&mid=%2Fm%2F02j71&gl=US&ceid=US%3Aen>

³ International Labor Organization: Slow job recovery and increased inequality risk long-term COVID-19 scarring: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_794834/lang--en/index.htm

⁴ Culture shock: COVID-19 and the cultural and creative sectors <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/#fnotea0z2>

⁵ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377863?posInSet=1&queryId=18d8b725-72cd-4018-ad79-bfdd0ee274e4>

⁶ Reshaping cultural policies, advancing creativity for development: https://en.unesco.org/creativity/sites/creativity/files/global_report_fact_sheet_en.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377863?posInSet=1&queryId=18d8b725-72cd-4018-ad79-bfdd0ee274e4>

especially women and children: culture and art have always played a significant role in creating identities and strengthening the social fabric.

As mentioned in the article, *Culture: at the Heart of SDGs*⁹, culture plays a core role in almost each SDG and enriches each one directly. Culture contributes to gender equality, decent work and economic growth, making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, reducing inequalities, and promoting health and well-being. It also takes urgent action in combatting climate change and its impact, and participates in enriching educational quality.

Ultimately, losses in the cultural and creative industry scene worldwide have a significant negative impact on development endeavors and foreshadow a less prosperous world for global citizens. Despite the many obstacles and challenges in place, the digital environment presented itself as a promising space for creative expression and entrepreneurship to flourish. In doing so, it introduced certain opportunities and challenges experienced throughout the world during this pandemic, but also developed in ways unique to the situation in Palestine

The Effects of Covid-19 on the Palestinian Cultural Scene

The Palestinian cultural scene is no different from the global cultural scene in terms of how it was affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The majority of players in Palestine occupying diverse roles in this sector have been drastically affected by this global crisis, whether individual artists, cultural organizations or even the public sector itself, represented by the Palestinian Ministry of Culture.

Overall, “the crisis has sharply exposed the structural fragility of some producers in the sector, as cultural and creative sectors are largely composed of micro-firms, non-profit organizations and creative professionals, often operating on the margins of financial sustainability”¹⁰. In Palestine, for instance, 79% of cultural institutions employ only 1-4 employees¹¹.

The number of private and non-governmental cultural institutions working in the field, as the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statics (PCBS) has stated, reached 1,068 in 2017, employing 3882 employees¹². Around 40 of these institutions permanently closed in 2020 due to the Covid-19 crisis¹³. Moreover, while the number of individual artists may be hard to determine, there have still been thousands of professional Palestinian individuals who economically depend on selling cultural goods or providing various cultural and artistic services and who were adversely impacted by the pandemic.

The Palestinian Authority (PA), like most governments and authorities globally, took precautionary measures to ban gatherings and restrict movement in order to contain the spread of the virus in Palestine. Naturally, this meant that hundreds of cultural and artistic events were cancelled while others were adapted to online performances when circumstances allowed.

Many cultural operators interviewed for this study believe that cultural interaction as a social endeavor was lost due to the aforementioned restrictive measures. At the same time, many also emphasized the necessity of adopting the available digital tools in such a crisis in order to maintain “at least the slightest cultural movement in local society” (Ramallah, musician).

⁹ Culture: at the heart of SDGs

<https://en.unesco.org/courier/april-june-2017/culture-heart-sdgs>

¹⁰ Culture shock: COVID-19 and the cultural and creative sectors

<https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/#fnotea0z2>

¹¹ Press Release by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS)& Ministry of Culture (MOC) on the occasion of the Palestinian National Culture Day:

<https://pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3938>

¹² ibid

¹³ ibid

Statistical Overview

Through the survey conducted for this study, data was collected from 92 individual artists, cultural organizations and other stakeholders working in different fields of culture and art in several districts in the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the diaspora, representing 55%, 30%, 14%, and 1% of those surveyed respectively. Below are the main findings:

Throughout the Coronavirus crisis, 71% of organizations targeted in the survey declared a dramatic loss in income (more than 30% income reduction), while only 27% declared a minor loss in income or no change at all.

In regard to audiences, 66% of the cultural organizations and artists surveyed declared a dramatic reduction in audience participation during the Covid-19 crisis, with more than a 30% reduction of audiences.

62% of the targeted organizations and artists declared a significant reduction in artistic production during the pandemic or even a complete halt in some cases, while 38% of respondents said that the pandemic only slightly affected their production or it did not affect it at all.

Organizations and individuals were also forced to take measures in order to address the financial crisis caused by the pandemic. These varied from organization to organization and from one artist to another. The statistics showcase these measures and how often they were adopted by the respondents:

- 48% of those surveyed were forced to reduce operational costs such as rent, utilities, etc.
- 43% were forced to work remotely in order to lower operational costs and to abide by movement restrictions.
- 28% had to cut salaries, and in some cases, decreased working hours for their employees.
- 26% completely cancelled all activities during the pandemic.
- 23% had to find another source of funding in order to keep afloat.
- 22% were forced to downsize their organization through other measures.

The Covid-19 pandemic coincided with an additional obstacle for some organizations who refused the new terms of conditional European funding¹⁴. This added yet another layer of complications to the distressed cultural sector. Coupled with not being able to perform or sell their cultural goods or services due to lockdowns and restrictions on movement, these organizations and artists' financial crisis worsened further.

It is very clear from the data inferred from the survey that the most current, pressing need of cultural organizations and artists is to find funding resources. 81% of these organizations expressed their need to secure funding in order to create and implement activities and cultural programs. Subsequent needs are stated in the following order:

- 42% of those surveyed stated the need to increase scalability.
- 37% cited needs to increase visibility in order to reach new audiences and possible funders.
- 22% cited needs to find a business partner in order to collaborate in production.
- 18% cited the need for customers.
- 15% cited the need for team members.
- 11% cited the need for access to innovative content.
- 7% cited the need to work on redefining their business model.

It is not new information that Palestinian cultural organizations or professionals depend on external grants and international aid to implement cultural activities and programs. Data from the survey shows their main sources of income as follows:

- 67% depend on grants.
- 34% depend on international aid.

¹⁴ Palestinian civil society rejects EU's conditional funding:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/1/palestinian-civil-society-rejects-eus-conditional-funding>

- 34% depend on live performances.
- 32% depend on the sale of cultural goods.
- 22% depend on donations.
- 21% depend on fixed salaries.

Data provided by the survey shows clear damage to the Palestinian cultural scene on many different levels, which requires action on the part of both the public and private sectors in order to preserve cultural work in Palestine. This aspect will be addressed in the recommendations section below.

The role of the Ministry of Culture during the pandemic

The Ministry of Culture is a national entity whose mission is to consolidate the concept of national culture and protect cultural identity through its support of creative cultural initiatives. Based on this premise, the Ministry of Culture played a leading role during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to maintain cohesion within the Palestinian cultural scene and to protect local cultural players from the adverse effects of the coronavirus.

Several initiatives were carried out by the Ministry of Culture, most prominently:

- **Grants:** The Ministry of Culture offered around NIS 800,000 in grants during 2020 to different cultural organizations, artists, youth, and writers among others. It also supported around 95 cultural projects and four long-term cultural projects during the pandemic through the Palestinian Cultural Fund, which added up to \$1 million.
- **Digital activities:** Sadly, a number of events, festivals, and book fairs organized by the Ministry were cancelled due to the spread of the virus. However, in order to overcome the obstacles imposed by the pandemic, the Ministry launched many digital cultural activities and programs, some of which included the following:
 - Talat Thaqafia: a series of live seminars on Facebook for a group of artists and writers including Palestinians around the globe.
 - Tiny Tales: a series of recorded plays, catered mainly to children, in cooperation with local theaters.
 - Al-Thaqafia channel (a cultural TV channel on IPTV): a TV channel was launched by the Ministry in an attempt to collect as many Palestinian digital cultural productions as possible and to make them available to the public via interactive televisions.
 - Virtual exhibitions: the Ministry organized virtual exhibitions for various Palestinian artists living in Palestine and abroad.
 - Musical composition: a Ministry-led initiative targeted 20 musicians who were asked to compose musical pieces, for which they received rewards.

Many other actions were taken by the Ministry to enable and strengthen the Palestinian cultural community throughout the pandemic such as: launching local **competitions** in the fields of writing, drawing, video and performing arts for different age groups; granting two **state awards** for literature; conducting three **literary forums** in 2020 with the participation of at least 100 Palestinian and Arab writers; supporting **the publication and distribution of books** whereby 350,000 books were distributed to several cultural organizations, schools and universities. There were several other **cultural programs and events** that also contributed to supporting artists and cultural organizations throughout the pandemic, on which there is not sufficient room to elaborate here. Additionally, the Ministry launched a number of **online campaigns** and participated in **international events and programs** aiming to discuss the ramifications of Covid-19 and ways to combat them, among other concerns.

Digital Environment in Palestine

This section will try to provide a brief yet comprehensive overview of the infrastructure of Palestine's digital environment by pointing to some of its main contributing pillars from a digital cultural perspective.

Digital Infrastructure

Digital infrastructures are the foundation for the development of digital culture. In this regard, digital infrastructure in Palestine is growing quickly as “there is a growing momentum and a sense of urgency inside the Palestinian territories to avoid being left behind in the digital transformation, and to fully embrace the benefits of digital development to foster economic growth and create better job opportunities”¹⁵. Still, “the Palestinian territories rank 123rd, well below the average compared to other Arab States or developing countries in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Development Index”¹⁶.

In order to assess the digital infrastructure in Palestine, we need to review the main aspects that make up this infrastructure, while noting that the private sector in Palestine takes it upon itself to entirely develop the digital infrastructure¹⁷ in its different forms: mobile broadband, fixed broadband, IT equipment.

For **mobile broadband**, “(3G) services were only deployed in the Palestinian territories in January 2018, contributing to one of the lowest mobile broadband penetration rates in MENA, at 5.39 % at end of 2018”¹⁸. However, penetration rates continue to grow as time progresses.

Even though the PA has the right, due to existing agreements, to “build and operate an independent telecommunications infrastructure along with the right to establish its own telecom policies, Israel has decision-making power over the frequency spectrum”¹⁹.

Both Palestinian operators in this field (Ooredoo and Jawwal) face restrictions by Israeli entities on two different levels: the first is market competition from Israeli operators who can offer 4G and LTE and have an estimated 20 percent mobile broadband market share in the West Bank²⁰. The second is related to **equipment**, meaning that the “restrictions on building cellular infrastructure in Area C have limited the ability of Palestinian mobile operators to serve Palestinian residents”²¹.

As for the **fixed broadband** in Palestine, “high-speed Internet access is still in the nascent stages of development”²², while the cost of the fixed broadband is considered proportionally high *per capita* since Paltel, the Palestinian telecommunication company, “has a monopoly over fixed-line telecommunications service provision”²³.

Overall, digital infrastructure development is growing at an unstable rate in Palestine. The fact remains that it will always be unstable as long as it is linked to political considerations and as long as Israel has the upper hand in controlling multiple aspects of digital infrastructure development in Palestine. In addition to this, costs will remain relatively high due to monopolies and limited competition in the sector.

Social Media

Statistics show that 70% of the Palestinians have a constant connection to the internet²⁴. A total of 7 million devices are connected to the internet in Palestine²⁵ (mostly mobile phones), while around 60% of Palestinians use different social media platforms²⁶. These numbers are constantly increasing for

¹⁵ Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee:

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/844141590600764047/pdf/Economic-Monitoring-Report-to-the-Ad-Hoc-Liaison-Committee.pdf>

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*

²² *ibid*

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Palestinian digital reality: <http://ipoke.co/SocialMediaOnPalestine2020.pdf>

²⁵ Digital 2021 in Palestine: <https://elevate.ps/digital-2021-in-palestine/>

²⁶ *ibid*

many reasons, one of them being the pandemic. Overall, it is clear that there are large audiences ready to interact with digital content if the suitable means are provided. Hence, it seems of primary importance to work on developing the technological aspect of culture in the future.

It is evident that a large share of digital content in Palestine is created on and accessed through various social media networks. Statistically, Facebook usage by Palestinian citizens reaches up to 92.01%, followed by WhatsApp at 76.81%, Facebook Messenger at 69.63%, YouTube at 64.77%, and Instagram at 63.25%²⁷, followed by many other social media platforms.

All of the organizations and individuals surveyed in this study use at least one social media platform to market their work or to raise awareness about it. While social media platforms may not be able to provide all of the opportunities for organizations and artists or fulfill all of their aspirations, they are still useful for public relations and raising awareness of people's cultural contributions in Palestine vis-à-vis the marketing of events, performances, goods and services.

Full utilization of these platforms may not have been achieved by Palestinian cultural operators, but they still play a significant role which needs to be further developed in the future.

Cultural Operators' Digital Skills

Only one third of those surveyed believe that they are well-informed about available digital technologies, while the majority (60%) believe that they have moderate or fair knowledge about available technologies. Very few respondents believe that they are not at all informed about available digital technologies.

When asked in the survey about the main obstacles that they encountered when working with digital technologies, many referred to the lack of digital literacy and skills, lack of training, and lack of expert advice on digital technologies that can be used in their work.

In order to create a powerful digital cultural scene, cultural operators must gain advanced skills in dealing with multiple digital components to enrich the digital culture value chain. A vital step to take in this regard would be to host programs or workshops to raise awareness among these cultural operators to give them better knowledge about the available technologies that can be used in their work. This would also contribute to involving them more in the digital cultural scene by creating more digital cultural content.

Projects

Aside from the startup economy that is growing and thriving in Palestine each day, many of those surveyed talked about different projects that they worked on digitally, especially throughout the Covid-19 crisis. These projects varied from online symposiums, podcasts, online cultural education, digital upload of organizations' archive making them available for audiences' viewing during the pandemic, along with many different initiatives that aimed to break down social distancing barriers.

It seems clear that when certain circumstances were imposed on the cultural scene – and many other scenes of course – launching technology-based projects was almost always the only answer to overcoming restrictions in a bid to reach “traditional” audiences and even expand the possibility of reaching new ones.

Ministry of Culture Strategy

An in-depth look at the Palestinian Ministry of Culture's Culture and Heritage Sector Strategy for 2017-2022 reveals that this strategy is capable of assessing the obstacles, needs, challenges, limitations and aspirations of the Palestinian cultural scene. The strategy is to some extent comprehensive and covers many different aspects given that it proposes a set of policies and programs to support cultural organizations, individuals, and the Palestinian cultural scene in general.

²⁷ Palestinian digital reality: <http://ipoke.co/SocialMediaOnPalestine2020.pdf>

In terms of a digital perspective, the current strategy does not seem to sufficiently emphasize the significant role that digital technologies can play in the Palestinian cultural scene, given that it is hardly mentioned in the strategy. This is also not in line with the National Policy Agenda for the same years (2017-2022) that identifies digital transformation and the digital economy as a top priority.

There is ample opportunity to include digital technologies in the programs proposed by the strategy to achieve more responsive goals for the digital reality we live in. Digital components could be more present and fully utilized in the strategy in the coming years.

Digital Environment: Concerns and Limitations

The digital environment in Palestine faces many challenges at various levels. While many concerns regarding digital technologies were expressed by the cultural operators surveyed and interviewed, the most significant ones were as follows:

- the exclusion of older generations.
- the concern that many cultural expressions cannot be fully digitalized and therefore may become marginalized.
- the possible elimination of job opportunities for many employees in the sector.
- fear over not being able to protect copyright.
- a possible increase of inequalities and limitation on the freedom of expression.

In addition to the lack of digital literacy and skills, training, and expert advice on digital technologies, those surveyed also mentioned the many obstacles encountered while working in digital technologies, mainly the lack of a comprehensive digital culture strategy at the national level and the lack of funding.

In addition to the limitations mentioned earlier, such as the lack of a 4G network (to date), and the Israeli control over Palestinian digital infrastructure, there is another vital factor limiting the digital environment in Palestine, which is embedded in Israel's violation of Palestinian digital rights and freedom of expression. Under the guise of 'security necessity', Israel hacks into thousands of personal Palestinian digital accounts, and removes – in cooperation with certain social media platforms – content that is not in line with its standards. Palestinian artists are sometimes even arrested for expressing their personal beliefs through their artwork ^{28 29}.

All of these concerns and questions need to be addressed through actions taken by parties of interest in the area, but more importantly, they need to be addressed in the public sector as represented by the Ministry of Culture. Such actions are meant to mitigate the negative effects of digital technologies for cultural operators through the implementation of policies that could play a major role in protecting the digital rights of cultural institutions and individuals. This will also consequently encourage further engagement in the creation of cultural digital content.

It is also imperative for the main players in the cultural field, both in public and private sectors, to discuss these issues and come up with a shared vision for dealing with limitations, concerns and challenges in the digital culture age.

Despite all the limitations mentioned in this section, there is still an opportunity for different cultural operators to take advantage of digital technologies.

Towards a Digital Culture

Digital culture may provide some answers to the many issues facing the cultural scene in Palestine, given that many technologies seem promising in encouraging its development, including: crowdfunding, E-commerce, online galleries, web and mobile applications and social media networks, and many

²⁸ Israeli control of Palestinian ICT infrastructure and its impact on digital rights: https://7amleh.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Palestinian-ICT-and-Digital-Rights_ARB_final.pdf

²⁹ Israeli impact on Palestinian digital rights during the Coronavirus pandemic: <https://7amleh.org/2020/08/20/alathr-alisraeyly-ala-hqwq-alfstynyyn-alrqmy-h-khlal-tfsh-y-fyrws-kwrwna-almstjd>

others. These can all provide new horizons for working in culture and arts, with a special attention to digital components in the production or distribution phases of cultural goods and artwork, which is considered key to keeping pace with widespread and rapidly-shifting technological trends. Furthermore, technology itself (as many of those surveyed responded) provides broader access to a great variety of cultural content and creates bridges between the sector's players.

According to recent studies, there has been a clear incline throughout 2020 in the use of all digital platforms in Palestine, as well as at the global level. Overall, as statistics have shown, there was a marked jump at the beginning of the pandemic from 43.5 billion visits to various digital platforms in February 2020 to almost 80 billion visits in April of the same year³⁰.

Based on a PCBS survey in 2020, the number of cultural activities in 2020 decreased by almost half compared to 2019³¹. What is noteworthy is the remarkable increase in the number of people attending online cultural events in 2020: "due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online participation was the dominant feature for cultural activities, with approximately 878,000 participants in cultural activities held by cultural centers in Palestine, out of which around 672,000 participated in online cultural activities"³².

Moreover, those surveyed said that they believe digital technologies to represent many opportunities for the art and culture sector because they increase access to culture as mentioned earlier, and because they allow for the development of new forms of expression and artistic experimentation. Additionally, they increase accessibility for people with disabilities and enhance the work of artists, cultural practitioners and entrepreneurs.

All of the aforementioned data points to a clear opportunity for moving forward in developing the many digital aspects of culture.

Main Results:

Despite the critical reality imposed by this pandemic on the cultural scene in Palestine, this sequence of events has opened a door onto the possibilities for the positive utilization of digital tools. This in turn can create new horizons in the Palestinian world of culture, enabling Palestinians to overcome current geographical divisions under which they fall, between the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and the diaspora.

Covid-19 has created the need to adapt to the available digital tools, and not only that, but to work on developing these tools in order to create a more comprehensive digital culture capable of engaging Palestinians everywhere under a cultural umbrella with one identity. Here lies the power of digital tools in their ability to create a Palestinian cultural scene capable of communicating with itself and other global cultures.

Recommendations:

Based on all of the above, below are some recommendations that may help to further activate the digital cultural scene in Palestine and prepare it to keep pace with development and overcome crises:

- Making continuous support from the Ministry of Culture available for individual artists and cultural organizations by providing grants and reducing taxes for those working in the cultural sector.
- Linking culture with other sectors such as: education, tourism, and information technology.
- Increasing investment in digital infrastructure and cultural digital content.
- Raising the level of social responsibility in the private sector in supporting the Palestinian cultural scene in general, and digital cultural initiatives in particular.

³⁰ Palestinian digital reality: <http://ipoke.co/SocialMediaOnPalestine2020.pdf>

³¹ Press Release by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) & Ministry of Culture (MOC) on the occasion of the Palestinian National Culture Day: <https://pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3938>

³² Ibid.

- Investing in building capacities in digital skills for cultural workers in the field.
- Building a digital network between Palestinian cultural operators to share ideas and experience related to digital culture.
- Redrawing policies that support, adopt and encourage the technology sector and digital culture in order to:
 - Protect the digital rights of all cultural operators.
 - Provide privacy for users.
 - Limit cyberbullying and ensure gender equality.
 - Include rural areas.