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Abstract

It was only after the invasion of 2003 and the gradual collapse of the Iraqi state that cellphones began to surface on Iraq's public market, for they have been previously banned by the regime of Saddam Hussein. This fairly recent breakage of the digital barrier rendered Iraq at the time as one of the most promising ICTs markets in the Middle East, with critical consequences on the larger Iraqi society, particularly since it also saw the introduction of the previously banned Internet. Using personal experience, as well as interviews with Iraqis from Baghdad, this paper argues that Iraqis creatively employed, and continue to employ, ICTs and Cellphones not merely as a tool of reconnection between the Iraqi diaspora and the homeland (and vice versa), continuously reconstructing their national identities, but also as tool of survival and risk assessment for Iraqis on the inside. This is of particular importance since the devastating consequences of the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq are still evident on the Iraqi social, urban, and political space until this day.

Keywords

ICT, Iraq, diaspora, identity, cellphones, digital barrier

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“Thank god I am finally able to hear your voices again. I am in Al Karada now [a popular local market in Baghdad]. The owner of Al Thuraya bast-ta [street vendor] is asking for too much money. I might lose connection in a few minutes. Let me speak to your mother quickly.”

Introduction

Those were the words of my grandmother the first time we heard her voice after losing touch for several weeks after the beginning of the U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Al Thuraya referenced in the quote were the satellite cell-phones that appeared on the Iraqi scene immediately following the overthrow of the Iraqi government, connecting a large portion of the Iraqi diaspora with their families in Iraq. Since then, multiple telecommunication corporations and operators have been established across the country. This paper will begin by providing a brief introduction on the state of digital access, particularly with regards to cellphones, in post-2003 Iraqi society and how this access contributed to the reshaping of certain cultural attitudes and practices, particularly within the urban Baghdadi society. This will then be followed by an examination of the role cellphones have had on the relationship between Iraqis in the diaspora and the homeland, and the transformations that resulted from that reconnection, particularly with regards to the renegotiation of an Iraqi national identity. Here, it is important to acknowledge that this relationship needs to be approached from two different yet interdependent trajectories: diasporic Iraqis on Iraq and Iraq on the Iraqi diaspora. Finally, I will also examine how the fragile post-2003 Iraqi political atmosphere of occupation and militant sectarianism has rendered the cellphones as a tool of survival and risk assessment for the Iraqi individual.

ICT in Iraq

Any discussion on ICT (Information Communication Technologies) in Iraq must first acknowledge the fact that the introduction of ICT into Iraq is fairly recent. Cell-phones, internet, and satellite television

were all banned by the dictatorial Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein prior to 2003, while state-operated landlines were perceived as being tapped by the interior ministry (Mark et al 2009). Thus, post-invasion Iraq witnessed the concurrent introduction of multiple forms of ICT, breaking the digital barrier that had been firmly maintained under the dictatorship. The digital barrier identified here is represented by the geographical borders of Iraq, beyond which Iraqis were able to access, but not necessarily acquire, different forms of ICTs. This introduction of a new market in the Middle East for ICTs rendered Iraq as one of the best telecommunication markets in the region, with an estimated cell-phone penetration rate of 70% of the population within 6 years of the invasion, in addition to the market of Iraqi Kurdistan, which have already had access prior to 2003 (Best 2011). Zain Iraq, one of the leading telecommunication operators in the country, recorded more than 10 million subscribers by 2009 (Figure 1).

which she argues that materials need not be defined merely by human interaction with them, but one also needs to consider their 'socially consequential' existence beyond human input. Similarly, the statistics mentioned above suggest that following the invasion, Iraqi society not only developed a strong response to the new opportunities ICT provided, but also exhibited new materialistic tendencies and prestige associated with phone ownership. For example, ownership of the newest cell-phone brands symbolized an elevated status and socioeconomic achievement at a time when the hopes for freedom and social and economic development had been dashed (and remain unfulfilled). In fact, this materiality was manifested less than one year following the invasion by the establishment of more than 400 privately owned internet cafes in Baghdad alone (Alexander 2005). Such developments support Burrell's strong materiality proposition, in which the properties of ICT played a critical role in a cultural transformation, rendering the virtual space

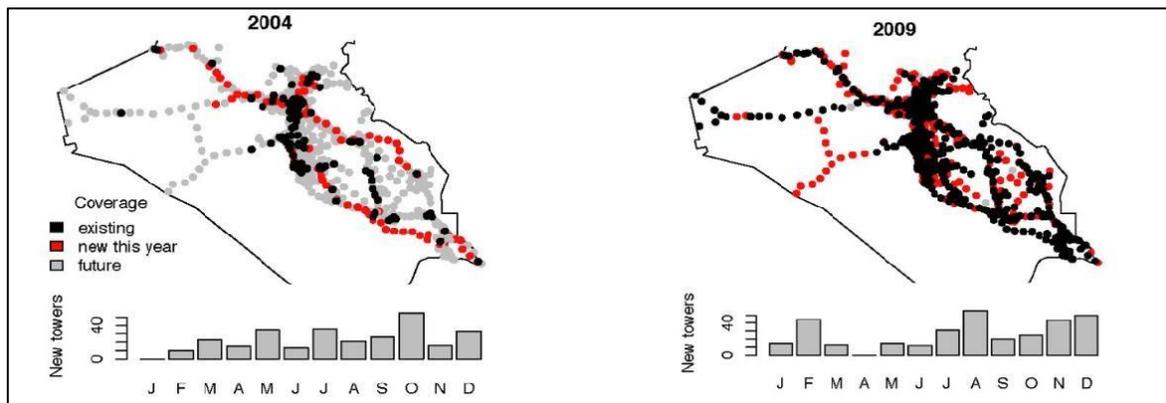


Figure 1. Coverage of Zain Iraq network between 2004 and 2009 (Shapiro and Weidmann 2011).

Here, it is important to recall the research conducted by Burrell (2012) on the strong materiality exhibited in Ghana following the introduction of the internet, in

provided by ICT as a space for possible cultural and social negotiation. This is of particular importance considering that for the eleven years preceding the invasion, the U.S. and its allies, represented by the United Nations, had imposed suffocating economic sanctions on Iraq that had detrimental consequences on the larger society. During

these punishing sanctions, Iraqis were prohibited from importing much needed goods and services from beyond Iraq's borders; goods that were not only necessary for their country's development but also for their own survival, such as heart and cancer medicines, surgical gloves, and even pencils (Simons 1996).

The earliest introduction of mobile ICTs to post-invasion Iraq was Al Thuraya satellite phone, which became the main means of communication with the outside world for many Iraqis. Even though Al Thuraya provided a critical benefit for Iraqis to contact their families outside of Iraq, the satellite phones had several drawbacks, including (most importantly) the cost of ownership and operation. When they were first introduced in Iraq, Al Thuraya satellite phones could cost between 600 and 1000 USD, while the charge for international calls surpassed the 8 USD/minute mark (MENA 2003). However, such high costs did not halt the expansion of Al Thuraya phones, since by May 2003 the provider had 20,000 subscribers in Iraq alone, which was expected to rise to more than 100,000 by the end of the year (MENA 2003). Based on personal inquiries with family members who resided in Baghdad during that period, personal ownership of Al Thuraya satellite phones was relatively rare due to its high costs. Instead, Iraqi small business owners employed Al Thuraya as another tool to generate profit by renting the phones to the public for a specified number of minutes in return for a fee that was generally higher than the actual cost of operation. Here, it is important to mention that the U.S military utilized Al Thuraya signals to locate Iraqi targets in the early periods of the invasion; a tactic that put civilian life at high risk due to the inaccuracy of such data (Human Rights Watch 2003). Consider for example this excerpt from Sa'dun Hassan Salih, an Iraqi man who lost six members of his

extended family, including his two-year old nephew, after a U.S. airstrike mistakenly targeted their house in Baghdad:

I don't know why the house was hit. There was no intelligence, no army nearby, no weapons. Why did Americans tell the world they hit only places of the army? Why did they hit civilian homes? (Human Rights Watch 2003: 34)

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the intended target of this airstrike was the half-brother of Iraq's previous president Saddam Hussein, who was presumed to be at this location based on the intercepted Al Thuraya signals.

Cell Phones and the Diaspora

Extensive research has been completed with regards to the role ICTs play in the relationship between diaspora and the homeland, and a main characteristic of that relationship is the role ICTs have on easing the psychological trauma geographical distance has created and fostered. As highlighted earlier, the influence of cell phones on this relationship needs to be approached within the two aforementioned contexts. For many Iraqis in the diaspora, homeland and family were not the only form of loss they had to endure; rather I propose that there was a constant fear of the loss of memory; memory that is associated with the homeland itself and its physical elements. Thus, the digital barrier that existed prior to the invasion contributed extensively to the maximization of this real and imagined loss. Here, imagined loss refers to the loss of memories. One could argue that the transformation of memory from its 'realized' state prior to migration,

to being imagined following migration is a form of initial loss within itself. What is meant by 'imagined' here is that being detached from the material contexts associated with a specific memory jeopardizes the existence of that memory. The material base in which it was rooted is no longer realized or experienced, rendering that memory as solely imagined, and thus threatened. Within this relationship, the breakage of the digital barrier through the cellphone helped Iraqis in the diaspora form repeated and continuous connections with their families in the homeland, imaginatively collapsing the distance, even if momentarily, between the 'here' and 'there'. Cellphones thereby reconnected them to the places and people in Iraq from which they had been involuntarily separated, and eased the trauma of separation. Thus, cell phone allowed Iraqis in the diaspora to form what Hiller & Franz (2004) termed "transnational connections" that mimic their real/imagined communities prior to migration. Since the acts of memorialization and reconstruction of the past are inseparable from cultural reproduction, then by extension it can be postulated that cell phones are also contributing to the reconnection of diasporic Iraqi communities with some of their cultural roots in the homeland, motivating the perpetual reconstruction of their Iraqi culture in the diasporic time and space.

When we discuss the usage of cell phones we must realize that they not only provide us with direct contact through calls and text messages, but allow access to the internet, a platform where political movements often develop and thrive. Conversi (2012) suggests that the internet has become a space for nationalist diasporas to achieve their political agendas in the homeland, an aspect that is certainly accurate for a wide spectrum of the Iraqi

diaspora. What Conversi (2012: 1360), borrowing from Eriksen (2007), termed as "internet nationalism" has been manifested by the Iraqi diaspora extensively through political propaganda Facebook groups, email newsletters, and political websites among many other outlets. Access to the Internet through the cell phone allowed such individuals to remain in contact with each other over multiple platforms, creating collective virtual communities in order to guide or motivate political change in the homeland. Prime examples of such formations are the multiple Facebook groups that document abuses committed by the post-invasion Iraqi governments and sub-government militias against civilians, which often published video or audio materials recorded by Iraqis with cell phones. The cellphone thus became a tool for the documentation of abuses, communication with concerned Iraqi groups outside of the country, and public propagation and sharing of information with the rest of the world (for an example from Kenya, see Ushahidi 2015). Thus, the cell phone becomes one of the tools employed in mobilizing cross-geographical collective solidarities based on political and national belonging(s), reflecting the various ideological trends of Iraqis in the diaspora. This process has been facilitated by the breaking down of the digital barrier and the opening up of the virtual space for uninterrupted communication.

Similarly, cellphone usage in Iraq enabled frequent communication with those who left, easing the emotional trauma resulting from the absence of family members and loved ones. The effects of the cell phones used from within Iraq cannot be underestimated, considering the large-scale migration following the US invasion, in which the cell phone played a major mediating role by providing Iraqis on the inside with the possibility of connecting with their counterparts who have already

migrated, and who functioned as a pull factor themselves concurrent with the multiple push factors in the country. Thus, one could argue that cellphones in particular, and ICT in general, contribute to providing the means to disseminate knowledge about life in the diaspora as a possibility for a safer and more secure life compared to the situation in Iraq. This might be one of the important factors that encourages further migration for some individuals and families in Iraq. In addition, this contact with Iraqis in the diaspora allowed Iraqis on the inside to reformulate their definitions of the Iraqi nation and/or homeland, whereby it is re-territorialized to include Iraqis within Iraq and in the diaspora. This aspect has certainly been shown to be true for the Greek-Canadian diaspora also, who over the years have engaged in a de-territorialization of their Greek identity to encompass a broader definition that is not necessarily confined to the geographical nation-state (Koukoutsaki-Monnier 2012). One can argue here that the inclusion of diaspora Iraqis within the larger notion of the Iraqi nation alleviates the sense of exile and loss by way of belonging to a national entity, and counters the traumas that result from the marginalization of migrant bodies in their new host countries.

Cell Phones and Survival in Iraq

The benefits of having access to ICTs and cell phones in particular are probably best examined in post-conflict societies, where survival becomes the main concern for the population (Best et al. 2010); the Iraqi society has been in the midst of conflict since 2003. Needless to say, people use different strategies to navigate through wars and traumatic experiences. Here, I will focus on two main forms or aspects relevant to the topic on cell phones, mainly remittances and coordination of in-country

relocations.

Like many countries that have massive diasporic networks that contribute significantly to local economies through remittances, such as the Caribbean diaspora (Minto-Coy 2011), remittances from Iraqis play a critical role in contributing to the survival of families in Iraq. Following a long and exhausting period of economic sanctions, the overthrow of the Iraqi government allowed for the introduction of numerous privately owned corporations into the industries of the country, which eventually saw a rapid increase in the cost of living relative to the economically crippled pre-2003 Iraq. Thus, for many Iraqis remittances from their families abroad were an essential support and coping mechanism to meet the increasing costs of basic necessities. Cell phones not only allowed contact with those family members abroad to coordinate the technicalities of such remittances, or contact with local money transfer firms, but was also a tool for Iraqis on the inside to send and receive money through mobile banking. In addition, as was highlighted earlier, cellphones like Al Thuraya were employed by many small business owners as another source of direct income.

Post-invasion Iraq not only witnessed the introduction of ICTs to the public sphere, but also saw the introduction of countless roadblocks and checkpoints manned by the U.S military, the Iraqi Military, or by sectarian militias that were often associated with Iraqi political figures (Zangana 2010). Such checkpoints not only posed a hindrance to the movement and travel of Iraqis, but also posed a huge risk to their lives if they were assumed to be of a different religious sect for example, or if they were stopped at a roadblock that happened to be targeted by an opposing insurgent group. Iraqis were thus forced to coordinate their movements in order to carry out their everyday lives in the least

troublesome manner, while at the same time assuring their survival. From this, cell phones were the mediator that allowed those who shared a community to inform each other of the locations of such dangers in order to avoid them when traveling, or to implement alternative plans for the day if the risk was too high (Mark et al 2009).

To illustrate this aspect further, consider the following findings. Interviewing six male and four female university contacts residing in Baghdad through Facebook, six have indicated to me that they have previously employed their cellphone to inquire about the safety of the usual routes leading to their university, the possibility of using public transportation, and whether their classes were running on normal schedule or not. Such forms of communication were particularly critical during the height of the sectarian violence between 2006 and 2008, a period during which the urban space of Baghdad was transformed into a site for kidnappings (targeting students journeying to school in particular), suicide and car bombs, death squads, and militant battles. This direness of this situation is further compounded when it is realized that most of the students I communicated with had attended (or still attend) the University of Baghdad, which is located near al-Karrada neighbourhood, one of Baghdad's busiest and most dangerous neighbourhoods until this day. Not only has al-Karrada seen consistent suicide and car bombings since the invasion, but it has also been the site of targeted kidnappings and assassinations. Here again, cellphones are not merely functioning within the globally generalized structures of everyday communication, but in multiple ways, become a tool for risk assessment and aversion, assuring the survival of these students.

Conclusion

It is important to note that this research did not examine the negative aspects of ICT expansion in Iraq, mainly with regards to the perpetuation of violence in all its forms against civilians, and the social marginalization and exclusion resulting from the increased material tendencies. Thus, the positive aspects of ICT discussed here must not be detached from a larger context that might be discordant with the ICT4D (Information Communication Technologies for Development) approach adopted in this paper; an approach that places emphasis on the productive application of ICT. Based on this research, as well as personal and family experiences, it is safe to assume that cell phones acted as catalyst in maintaining connections and relationships between Iraqis living within Iraq and in the diaspora on the one hand, but also within and among Iraqis whether in Iraq or outside. In turn, this quickened the pace in reconfiguring the economic, social and cultural landscape resulting from years of sanctions and war. In the process, the digital revolution opened up spaces for new cultural elements characteristic of or associated with this new digital sphere. Cell phones provided Iraqis with a space for actual and imagined movement to and from Iraq as a home and a homeland, by allowing access to events and matters concerning Iraq and the diaspora shared on multiple cellphone compatible platforms. Thus, the cell phone allowed for the creation of virtual subaltern (Spivak 1988) communities; marginalized communities that did not necessarily share in a collective worldview whether in the homeland or the diaspora, and in fact came together virtually despite the differences, whether religious, cultural, or political.

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