

Accessing Information Technology- Social Media in Iraq

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Abstract- In recent years, social media has become one of the most important factors accompanying the development of the Iraqi society. The media industry has experienced tremendous growth and development over the last ten years in Iraq. Prior to 2003, the Iraqi media was restricted and lacked the freedom of speech. After 2003, the media became more liberal and somewhat less restricted. However, the problem is that it still lacks the well-organized strategic plans to get to the hearts of the Iraqi citizens and to make them believe in all what they say either online or on some of the T.V. channels. This study attempts to answer the following research question: what is the state of the Iraqi media pre and post 2003? The aim of this research is to identify the state of the media industry in Iraq pre and post 2003. To examine the research problem, the researchers investigated the state of social media in Iraq and shared the participant's lived experience of the use of media as a means of communication while he was in Iraq. To collect the data, the researchers interviewed an Iraqi man who moved to the U.S. in 2005. The results indicate that the social media in Iraq is more powerful and effective now than it was before 2003 and the number of Internet and social media male and female users increased in the last ten years.

Index Terms- Information Technology, Iraqi Media, Media Industry, Social Media

I. INTRODUCTION

Information Technology (IT) is, in fact, the core business for most industries. IT is the field which pertains to the skills needed to increase, retain, and use information processing systems, software, hardware and networks for the processing and delivery of data (ARMA International, 2007) [2]. The core business refers to main activity of the industry. IT has become the backbone of commerce and supports the industries operations. IT links the business with their customers (Carr, 2003) [4]. Generally speaking, it is good for any industry to get rid of the other inadequate business and to implement new strategies. IT is the core for most industries in the 21st century. The core business is the most important area that any company focuses on in its business operations (Business dictionary, 2012) [3]. IT helps in improving measures of business value such as the revenue and productivity. IT value models have several assumptions like a commodity input and cost efficiency which enable firms to set their strategic plans regarding product quality and consumer value (Thatcher and Pingry, 2007) [18]. The mass media such as newspapers, TV and radio are very important in the modern societies. Media is a very powerful source of

influence and innovation. It is the primary means of transmitting essential information.

Over the past decades, advances in information technology have restructured industries and formed huge importance. During the new era, the vast development of communication and information technology has influenced cultures everywhere. The technological innovations changes are an example of what is happening where they turn the world into a small global village. These changes include the emergence of new technologies: satellites, cable television, disks, computer and digital technology, etc. This is clearly the age of information technology where IT brought a revolution in the field of media industry (Carr, 2003) [4].

Social Media industry has witnessed a fast growing pace and the conventional mass media has been updated by the most sophisticated technological tools. Information revolution had made the process of transferring the information or news very easy all over the world (Friedman, 2005) [9]. For example, newspapers were published in a shape, which looks like handwriting. However, in the age of IT, computer is used as the part media industry such as composing, printing, animation, diagrams, audio, video visuals, online newspapers, and magazines publishing (Khattak, 2012) [11].

The increasing of electronic delivery of news on the web came to age in 1995. There were about 20 newspapers published online worldwide such as prodigy and CompuServe. The number of online newspapers increased to thousands in 1994. Based on this increase, the relation between the journalist and the technical means to report the news to people became the new type of communication and it is called "the techno journalist" (Khattak, 2012) [11]. However, electronic delivery of news on the web is new to Iraqis. This electronic delivery launched after 2003.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Media and Information Age

In the past 50 years, electronic media (radio, TV, computers, satellite, etc.) were the central tools and communication technologies in assisting with transmitting the information to people (McDowell, 2004) [13]. The Information Age brings new challenges since 1950 where people would like to have multimedia sources available for them to use. The term is used to describe a cybernetic society, which depends on the computers and data transmission. The familiar frame of understanding an industrial society relies on the human labor and the machines they use to produce goods. Because of the continual changes over decades, geographic barriers are being dissolved, and relation between the employees and their workplace is changing rapidly. New information technologies and forms of

communication have emerged to solve problems and set new directions for issues that have been around for some time. If we take literacy as an example, we will see that people can read, write, type, print by using computer literacy (Khattak, 2012) [11].

In our society, the nature and function of media has been changed essentially through the use of digital technologies. Although old age practices such as newspapers and magazines still exist, they have been altered by new practices such as the spread of TV, satellite, Internet, online media, etc. These technologies are very important to keep the public informed on matters of public importance (Pavlik, 2008) [14].

IT is the cause of changes for majority of industries. IT is a strategic tool and without information and technologies, changes are not possible. In the 1990s most of the industries all over the world used telecommunicated networks of computers at the center of information systems and communication processes. The innovation of new technologies makes communication more powerful and easier. Technology does not solve the social problems, but it is the essential tool for development and creativity in societies (Castells, 1999) [5]. Schwandt (2007) [15] states that computers assist with data analysis. They can facilitate the management of large volumes of data and enable workers or analysts to locate, labels, and collects different combinations of segments of textual data. Research has shown that IT can aid in improving industry goals where this includes achievement in several different areas for stakeholders in the workplace. For example, peoples' motivation is enhanced when we use technology to assist a person in facilitating a particular plan. In addition, the use of technology in the social media helps to connect people with the outside world. Finally, technology can offer resources and experiences that books are not able to offer.

Journalists in the past are different from the ones today in reporting, thinking, and using technological tools to publish their work. The journalist has to be deeper and diverse in understanding and communication with people. Technology makes editing more easily than before where editors can use computer to make all the editing. Before, editors used hand writing or pen and paper to do the job which used to take a lot of time. This is comparable to previous generations of technology being used such as the typewriter verses modern computer. With computer, people can correct and edit quickly and save the data. Moreover, the use of the pointer, or electronic pen, on screen enables deletions and changes faster than by ball-pen. It also helps in getting a clean copy without the scribbles, which we may have on the hard copy subbing. It is worth mentioning that many newspaper offices use their facilities a little bit once the data editing has been transferred into the computer. This shows how technology saves time, cost, and place to complete the work Schwandt (2007) [15].

B. Country Background

Iraq is one of the Arabic Middle Eastern countries and has an area of 169,234 square miles. It is bordered by Iran from the east, Jordan and Syria from the west, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia from the south, and Turkey from the north. Baghdad is the capital. The oil industry constitutes the majority of Iraq's economy. The Iraqi population consists of several ethnic groups, including Arab Muslim Shiite, Arab Muslim Sunnis, Kurds, Assyrian,

Turkoman, Chaldean, Armenian, Yazidi, Sabean, and Jews. Arabic is the spoken language in most provinces and Kurdish is the official language in Kurdistan (Jacob and Abedalla, 2013) [10]. The following figure illustrates the map of Iraq.

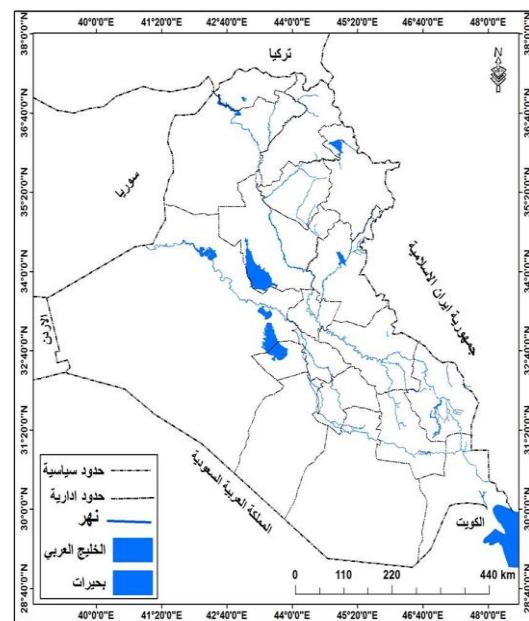


Figure 1. Map of Iraq

C. Internet and Social Media in Iraq

In recent years, the Internet and social media, as a means of communication, users have been growing very quickly. There was no clear number of the Internet users prior to 2003 because there were only few people who had access to the Internet. However, the number of users started to increase after 2003 (Arab IP Centre, 2014) [1]. Currently, the Internet situation and access to social media has improved dramatically, as there are now 26 Internet hosts (CIA, 2014) [6]. The last data collected regarding civilian access to the Internet was in 2009 and at that time approximately 325,900 Iraqis had home Internet access, ranking 126th for Internet access globally (CIA, 2014) [6]. While this is an improvement, people access, small businesses, and government infrastructure continue to cripple Iraq in becoming globally competitive. While the government may not be persecuting Internet users, individuals may risk retaliation from armed militias. Until all sectors of society have their rights to access information, freely exchange information and ideas, and express opinions in compliance with universal human rights, the country will continue to lag behind other nations during the accelerated pace of globalization (United Nations, 2013) [19].

IREX audience research shows that social media and mobile devices play a vital role in the life of the Iraqi citizens on which they depend to gather their news and information about Iraq. However, the TV is still the primary source for news and information for them (Tachovsky, 2011) [16].

Tariq (2011) states that "the U.S. government pump an estimated half a billion dollars into revitalizing Iraq's news media after...2003. It was the first time in three decades that Iraqi citizens had access to a free press, but the current state of news media in the multiparty republic is not what some had

hoped for" (para. 1). Moreover, most Iraqis feel that the journalism in Iraq faces the problem of censorship for both local and foreign journalists. The number of radio listeners is small in comparison with the number of TV viewers. This indicates the low levels of trust in these broadcastings (Whitehouse and Johnson, 2011) [21]. The following figure, which is quoted from IREX research and cited in (Whitehouse and Johnson, 2011) [21], shows the percentage of the viewership trust in the TV challenges. The highest percentage of viewers is Al-Sharqiya TV with 66% and the lower percentage of viewers is Rotana Cinema with 45%.

There is a significant disparity in trust and viewership

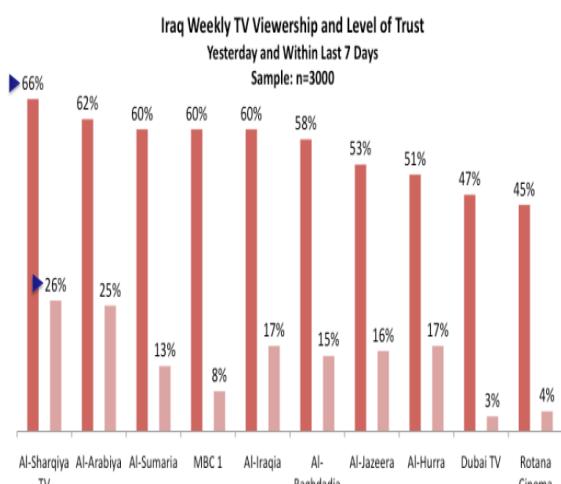


Figure 2. Viewership Trust (Source: Whitehouse and Johnson, 2011, p. 25 [21])

III. METHODOLOGY

This study attempts to answer the following research question: what's the power of the Iraqi media pre and post 2003? The purpose of this research is to identify the effectiveness of the media industry in Iraq pre and post 2003.

A. Data Collection Procedures

A qualitative (QUAL) research approach was used to examine the research problem. The participants were only one Iraqi male who moved to the US after 2003. The researchers interviewed the participant over the phone. The participant agreed to participate in this study on a voluntary basis to share his lived experience and knowledge about the power of media in Iraq pre and post 2003. A short survey was developed by the researchers and was tested in a pilot study for validity and reliability. The survey consisted of 11 closed-ended and open-ended questions (See instrument below). The Open-ended questions gave the participant a chance to respond to questions in different ways without being restricted. Through the questions, his feelings with regard to the research problem were elicited and this provided depth to the problem since a lot of information was provided.

B. Instrument

Although the number of social media users is increasing in Iraq, the problem is that its power and effectiveness still lacks the well-organized strategic plans to get to the hearts of the Iraqi citizens and to make them believe in all what they say either online or on some of TV channels. Therefore, in order to gather data that can be used to solve the problem, the researchers surveyed an Iraqi man to give important insights about the challenges that face the social media in Iraq. The survey questions were as follows:

- 1- How old are you?
- 2- When did you move from Iraq to US?
- 3- What is your level of education?
- 4- Where have you completed your education, in Iraq or in the US?
- 5- What social media do you use to communicate with your Iraqi friends and family?
- 6- How was the Internet and social media pre 2003?
- 7- How is the Internet and social media after 2003?
- 8- Do you trust the current news TV channels and Internet websites? Why?
- 9- Do think that the social media is more powerful and effective now than it was before 2003? Explain
- 10- What are the specific communication challenges that you would like to address?
- 11- What do you recommend for the current news TV channels and Internet websites so they can get to the hearts of the Iraqi citizens and to make them believe in all what they say either online or on TV?

C. Social Dimensions Model

Laudon's (1999) [12] model of the five moral dimensions of the information age was adapted for this study. This model explains the relationship between ethical, social, and political issues and information society. This model was quoted as it fits the theme of this case study where all these five moral dimensions are impeded within the Iraqi social media business.

The emergence of new IT has raised ethical, social, and political issues. These issues have five moral dimensions of the information age that include information rights obligations (protect and respect), property rights obligations (property in a digital society), system quality (safety of society), quality of life (prevent violation, cultural values), and accountability and control (system liability). The following figure exemplifies the relationship between ethical, social, and political issues and information society (Laudon, 1999) [12]:

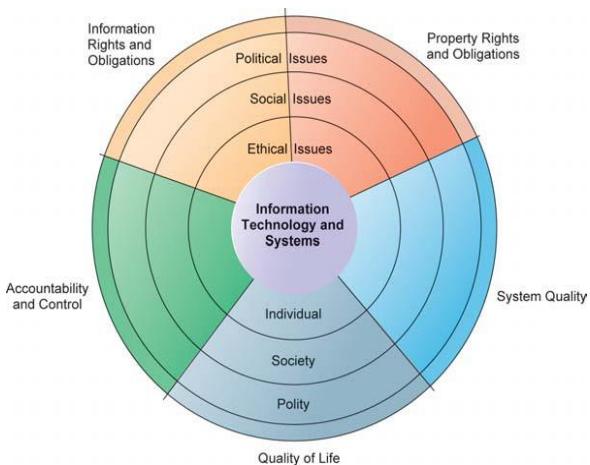


Figure 3. Five Moral Dimensions of the Information Age
(Source: Laudon, 1999, [12])

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

To examine the research problem, the researchers used a qualitative (QUAL) research approach to state the results of this case study.

The results indicate that the participant is a 34-year old Iraqi male who emigrated from Iraq to US in 2005. The participant was working as a local interpreter for the US army in the city of Mosul in Iraq. He helped the US troops with interpretation and translation during their 2003 military operation in Iraq. The participant received his bachelor degree in English language and translation from the University of Mosul in Iraq, but he also received a master's degree in Public Administration from the University of Pennsylvania in the US. The participant uses several kinds of social media including mobile phone, Facebook, Twitter, What's up, Viber, Skype, Instagram and WeChat, etc. to communicate with his Iraqi friends and family back home.

The researchers asked the participant about the status of the Internet and social media before 2003. The participant said:

"before 2003, Iraqis did not have online media or Internet. Only graduate students had Internet access and most of the websites were blocked for security purposes. The only social media we had at that time was the land phone that we used to communicate with one another."

Our case participant was asked about how the status of the Internet and social media after 2003 was. Our case participant said:

"The word 'boom' is not enough to describe the change where it was from having nothing to have everything."

Based on the participant's responses to the survey questions, the results also show that Iraqis did not have either TV cable or satellite and the only thing available to them was the national TV with only two local channels to keep the Iraqi population away from the world. However, after 2003, the Internet, online media, satellite, and various other information technologies became available to the public. The number of Internet and social media users has been increased over the time. If we compare the two periods of pre and post 2003, we can see that for years Iraqis used to know about the world news through the Iraqi local printed newspapers. After 2003, publishers were fascinated with the fact of delivering information to people electronically

because of its benefits for both the producer and consumer. The participant also added that information in printed publication may reach the readers much more slowly than online. This means that the information can be updated at anytime of the day with the online version, but it takes more time and is more costly with printed publications. It is also easier and quicker to look up the information online other than waiting for the printed newspapers. The participant said:

"during the years I lived in Iraq, the old newspaper publication industry was controlled by the government. There were only two Iraqi channels on TV as local channels and there were only three to four local newspapers and the editors were not allowed to write about anything until the news is cleared. There were many restrictions and no one can go beyond these restrictions and publications requirements."

This means that the Iraqi people had limited sources before 2003. Yet, all these have been changed where so many websites emerged and several new newspapers publications start to appear for public. They have all the tools and technique to publish their news online. They can also edit, post pictures, and update the readers within hours, if not minutes. An additional aspect of this is these online newspapers try to compete each other by trying to reach their readers through focusing on the human needs and their social life and "the Iraqi street thinking."

The participant was asked if he trusts the current news TV channels and Internet websites and why. His response was:

"Some! I do not trust all of them because some of them are loyal to particular political parties and they just focus on what they want their followers to hear. I, myself, like to diversify my sources of news. Most of them are biased to whoever is funding them or to whichever entity sponsoring them. I trust some more than others because they are less biased. I hope in the near future that all news TV channels and Internet websites work together to build the trust of their audience and readers."

The participant was also asked if the social media is more powerful and effective now than it was before 2003. The participant indicated that the current status of media is more powerful and effective in Iraq. He said:

"I think the social media is more powerful and effective now than it was before 2003 because everyone can access the Internet easily and we have mobile phone and more Satellite channels which we did not have in the past. Also, people can use other apps and social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter to stay in touch with their friends and family members."

When the researchers asked the participant to clarify how the social media is more powerful and effective now, the participant explained that by saying that people can post blogs and share events from all over the world so all know what is happening in the world. He also referred to the Arab Spring and how the Egyptians, Syrians, Libyans, etc., used Facebook in their revolutions. He also added that people go to different media sites to look for the truth and source of news. He also added that they did not have all these apps or social media resources prior to 2003 indicating that the media was less powerful and effective at that time.

When the researchers asked the participant about the specific communication challenges that face the social media in Iraq, he explained that most of the sites' owners and organizers lacks the strategic plans and require more organization. The big challenge

is to have a trained professional team. The other challenge is the blockage or the bans they face once something related to the country security and instability happened. The problem of not having Internet available is one of the big challenges of continuous communication.

The researchers also asked the participant if he has any recommendations for the current news TV channels and Internet websites so they can get to the hearts of the Iraqi citizens and to make them believe in all what they say either online or on TV. He said:

"First, they have not to be biased. Second, their websites and news have to be up-to-date as I see their websites are not updated quickly as the media sites in the West."

The participant also recommended that news channels and the Internet sites organizers and owners have to have a structured policy based on the country culture, copyrights policies, privacy and data selling protection, quality and trained employees, and work together for the country benefits. These will make the social media in Iraq more powerful and effective.

In summary, and according to five social dimensions model in figure two above, the people of Iraq were used to buying newspapers from local sellers, but lately the number of buyers of newspapers decreased. Only the older generation and few members of current generation still read hard copies of newspapers because most of the people right now use Internet or satellite to get the news as part of the social life within the Iraqi family. It also created ethical and political issues where politicians use the media IT tools to share the news of other political parties and especially through their election campaigns. Although IT is the core of business, it also creates ethical problems where privacy is not protected. Information privacy rights aim to protect the personal information for individuals. Privacy breaking is the collecting of one's personal information or physical integrity as opposed to privacy protection. There will be an issue if there is no safeguard system quality that protects the safety of individuals and society, and preserves the values of the quality of life in an information society. The nature of the relation between media and society depends on circumstances of time, cost and place with free-market (Weitzner et al, 2008) [20].

V. CONCLUSIONS

Communication is culture and culture is communication. It is "giving or giving and receiving information signals or messages by talk, gesture, writing, etc" (Debons, 2008) [7]. Information and communication technology within a short time became the main foundation of modern society. IT is one of basic skills to educate people in many different fields. Mass media is one of the fields that focus on technologies nowadays. The industry media in Iraq has changed over the time and especially when technology introduced to be used in media after 2003. The number of news readers and listeners has been increased since 2003 with the emergence of Internet in Iraq, yet the newspapers and magazines has been decreased. Despite the IT is the core business in media industry in many countries since several long years, it is new to Iraq and faces several challenges. It also lacks the trust of all the citizens.

In the age of globalization, the Internet is the primary mode of access to social media and general communications. When

Internet access is interrupted, restricted, or heavily censored, nations struggle to remain competitive in the global economy. People who are unable to access information and networks that form the typical communications platform globally find themselves facing both systemic human rights violations and a narrow view of the global village. Iraq has faced certain challenges with regard to Internet access, censorship affecting accessibility, censorship restricting the free sharing of opinions and ideas, and infrastructure stability issues.

The Internet was slow to become integrated into ordinary Iraqi homes due to the cost and restrictions before 2003. During the early years of the Internet in Iraq, problems ranged from domain names to censorship interference and the risk of retaliation in the form of violence against individual users for their Internet activity. While other nations with fewer controls were able to utilize social media networks to organize and create political movements, this was not possible in Iraq to a comparable extent.

In order to have the best practices for the Iraqi media, the researchers recommend that the Iraqi media to implement policies for copyright and data selling protection. They have not to be biased and they have to have well-organized strategies to improve the quality of their work. This will enable them to be more powerful and effective and attract the interest of their readers and audience.

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