Sharqiyya

Internet in the Middle East

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One of the obvious and fascinating internet trends in the Arab World is the open proliferation of blogs (*Mudawwanāt*). The blog is a form of web diary which anyone can view, and serves as a platform for the writer to raise his opinions and impressions on a variety of subjects. In fact, any internet user can easily start a blog at no cost. One of the prominent attributes of this form of communication, which appeals to many bloggers, is the ability to remain anonymous as a writer. This is very important to the Arab bloggers who wish to express their opinions and stances freely without the fear that the government or other authorities will take punitive steps against them. Currently there are 490,000 blogs in Arabic, only 0.7% of the total amount of blogs in the world.[i]

Even though no numbers have yet to be released regarding the number and extent of the Iraqi blogs,[ii] this column will focus on one Iraqi blog that stands out in particular, *Baghdad Burning*, which although written in English, succeeded well both in Iraq and around the world, and was written from a feminine perspective.

Baghdad Burning

http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com

Foreword

There is an abundant amount of scientific literature on the blog culture and the blogosphere: it encompasses many related fields of study, such as

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[i] Egypt is the home of a large percentage of the blogs in the Arab World – 30%. This number was taken from a report presented at a conference in Dubai on the topic of "Communication in the Arab world, between Traditional Media to New Media." See *Al-Halij*, May 13, 2009. In: http://www.alkhaleej.ae/portal/c5517606-0ffe-4f61-b494-2b5cab55562c.aspx.

[ii] It is possible to visit a website which claims to concentrate all the Iraqi blogs in English and Arabic.

examining the language used by bloggers, the social networks formed through them,[1] the blog itself as an expression of local alternative media, its contribution to the tension with the traditional media,[2] and many others.[3] In attempting to analyze any given blog in cyberspace, it is best to examine the context in which it was started and the motivation that led the author to start it. Examining the blog's contents may help answer this question.[4] Yair Amichai-Hamburger views the blog as an "answer for a variety of psychological needs, but first and foremost it constitutes an answer for our need for self-expression and contact with others. In this way, the blog comprises a potential answer for the existential conflict between the will to realize individualism and the need to belong. As an answer to significant and important psychological needs, the blog will continue to be an important influencing factor in our lives."[5] In fact, it is possible to list a few of the primary potential motivations for starting a blog:

- To document the blogger's life, activities and experiences.
- To serve as a platform in which the blogger can express an opinion on various topics.
- To answer an intense urge to express feelings on a particular topic, and to share it with the on-line community.[6] This actually creates an imaginary community, which can respond, if such an option exists, to the contents and start a discussion on the topic.

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[1] Stephanie Nilsson, *The Function of Language to Facilitate and Maintain Social Networks in Research Weblogs*, Umeå Universitet, in:
www.humlab.umu.se/files/pdf/LanguageBlogs.pdf.

[2] See for example: Bart Cammaerts & Nico Carpentier, "The Internet and the Second Iraqi War: Extending participation and challenging mainstream journalism?," in Nico Carpentier and others (eds.), *Researching Media, Democracy and Participation*, (Tartu, Estonia: Tartu University Press, 2006), pp.159-177.

[3] See for example an innovative study, which is attempting to prove that the activity of bloggers on-line reflects to a certain extent their daily interactions: Maha Taki, "The Demise of 'Virtuality': A Case Study of Weblogs in Lebanon and Syria," in Carpentier and others (eds.), *Democracy, Journalism and Technology: New Developments in an Enlarged Europe*, (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2008), pp.281-292.

[4] For a study, which offers a theory for examining blogs , see: K. D. Trammell, A. Tarkowski and others, "Rzeczpospolita Blogów [Republic of Blog]: Examining Polish bloggers through content analysis," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 11, Issue 3, (2006), in: http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue3/trammell.html.

[5] Yair Amichai-Hamburger, "Mah Menia Golshim Lenahel Belog" (What motivates surfers to manage a blog?," *Ynet*, June 28, 2007 at: http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3418780,00.html.

[6] There are those who call this the blogger's catharsis: the blog serves as psychological answer for venting feelings, which helps reduce the blogger's emotional overload. Bonnie A. Nardi and others, "Why We Blog?," *Communications of the ACM*, Vol. 47, No. 12, (December 2004), pp.41-46. In:
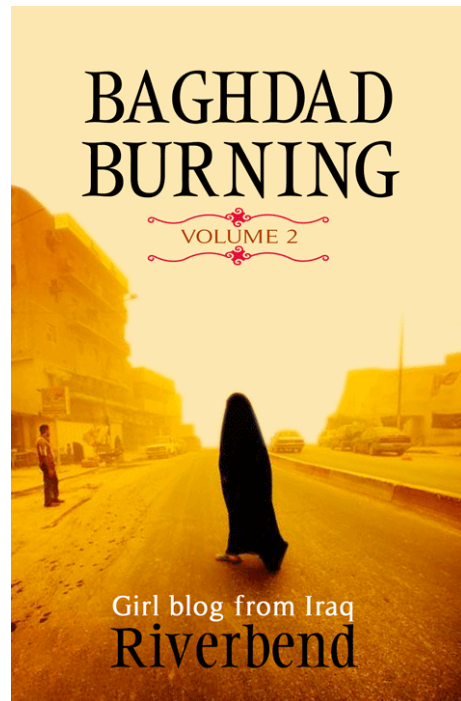http://darrouzet-nardi.net/bonnie/pdf/Nardi_why_we_blog.pdf.

- To promote public dialogue, or a particular agenda that is supported by the blogger or a specific group.[7]

In the Middle East blogs have been increasing at an astounding rate in recent years, and the blogs should be should be studied from this perspective. In particular, the studies should focus on investigating the context in which the blog was started and examining the blogger's motives from that time. The Iraqi blog, *Baghdad Burning*, can serve as a case study, which will be analyzed according to the aforementioned criteria.

Background

The collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 indicated for the Iraqi people an end to a period of continued oppression and was an encouraging sign of a new, better future – a future that contained the beginning of the establishment of democracy and free speech. In reality, this was also the year

The book cover published by Marion Boyars

when Iraqi blogs, which had just started appearing, truly began. The construction of a widespread technological infrastructure, the rise in the number of internet-café sites, and the political and social openness of the Iraqi government and population to the western world all contributed towards accellerating the growth of the Iraqi blogs.

Yet at the same time, there is the blog, *Where is Raed* by Salam Pax (It is unknown if this is his true name),[8] one of the first Iraqi blogs, and among the few posted on-line already in June 2002. It was regularly updated until April

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[7] Other motives are more related to professional considerations, such as making professional knowledge more accessible to the public at large, using blogs as a tool to aid the study programs at education institutions. The latter trend has been gaining momentum in recent years. See for example: Toril Salen, *Weblogs and Blogging: Constructivist Pedagogy and Active Learning in Higher Education*, M.A. Thesis, (Norway: University of Bergen, February 2007).

[8] Salam Pax was a 29 year old architect at the time, who lived with his parents in Baghdad. For an extended interview with him, see: Rory McCarthy "Salam's story," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2003.

2004.[9]. The blog is named after Raed, a friend of the blog's owner who he met in Jordan. The two had difficulty maintaining contact due to technical difficulties with Raed's e-mail. To overcome this difficulty, Salam started his blog in order to update Raed on his everyday activities, and sometimes to express criticism against the Baath Party regime's policy of oppression. However, after the second gulf war started, the blog changed its tone. It became a unique voice which expressed the mood of the residents of Baghdad who dwelt in the shadow of the war between Iraq and the coalition forces, as seen through the eyes of a local resident. This blog served as an inspiration for other Iraqi blogs, particularly the Iraqi blog *Baghdad Burning*,[10] a blog which overshadowed other Iraqi blogs including *Where is Raed?*, and which received a lot of praise and appreciation in the western world.[11]

The Iraqi Blog Baghdad Burning

Baghdad Burning was first published in August 2003 by an anonymous Iraqi blogger under the fictional name Riverbend.[12] She was a 24 year old computer blogger living in Baghdad. The blog continued to release updates until October 2007.[13] The blog, which was written in English, is unique in that it presented a feminine perspective of the events and the daily lives of the residents of Baghdad after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, following the U.S. conquest. In the blog's first entry:: "Well, this is the beginning for me, I guess. I never thought I'd start [writing] my own weblog... All I could think, every time I wanted to start [writing] one was 'but who will read it?' I guess I've got nothing to lose... but I'm warning you – f expect a lot of complaining and ranting. […]. I'm female, Iraqi and 24. I survived the war. That's all you need to know. It's all that matters these days anyway."[14]

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9 http://dear_raed.blogspot.com. The contents of the blog were reposted in a new blog by Salam Pax, which contains new material at http://salampax.wordpress.com.

10 http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com.

11 The owner of the blog explicitly stated that Salam Pax, "who is considered the father of Iraqi blogs […] encouraged me to start my own blog," and that in addition to him Iraq "was the inspiration for my blog." See: Firas Al-Atraqchi, "Iraqi Blogger Documents History," *Aljazeera*, April 6, 2009. In:
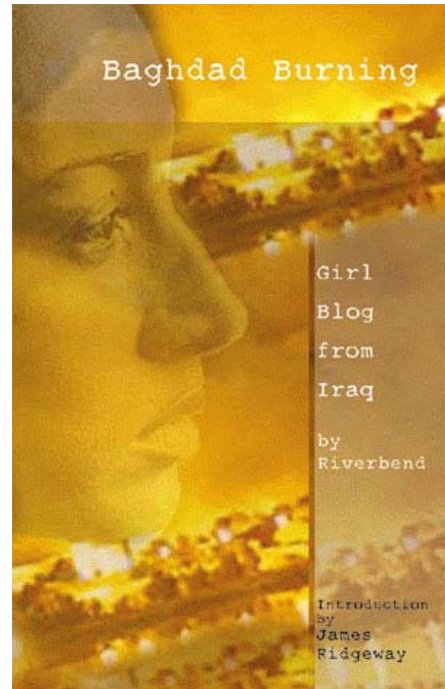http://english.aljazeera.net/archive/2006/04/2008410113039873303.html.

12 According to her, she preferred to use a fictional name to maintain anonymity for security purposes: "in the beginning I chose to be anonymous, because it allowed me to talk about whatever I wanted without fear of punitive action – this included political parties, religious figures […]. I could not use my name for fear of arrest or even worse." *Ibid*.

13 Today the blogger lives with her family in Syria, after having emigrated there from Baghdad.

14 August 17, 2003,
http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/2003_08_01_riverbendblog_archive.html.

In her blog Riverbend relates how she lost her job at a computer company when the war started, and how the search for a new job was life-threatening not only for her, but for every other Iraqi citizen, due to a lack of security, which was prevalent during the first few years following the American conquest. This reality was characterized, according to her, also by a lack of water, electricity, fuel and gas, and of course by a feeling of dread whenever it was necessary to go out into the street to buy basic food products. In April 2006, the author told Al-Jazeera in an interview that the fact that the Iraqi media was ignoring the suffering of the Iraqi

The book cover, published by Feminist Press

citizens motivated her to start a blog, which would focus on the reality of the Iraqi people, and specifically on Baghdad: "I began blogging as a way to vent frustrations and fears about the instability and insecurity, I continue to blog because I feel that the media covers the situation in my country in a very general way. Many articles or reports don't even begin to touch the daily reality Iraqis face."[15]

Although the blog bears the person mark of the author, some-times it appears to rise above the personal level. Thus, for example she provides data on the amount of Iraqi casualties and refugees, the numbers of the conquering forces in Iraq, reports of armed militias that kidnap children, of the mood regarding the character of the new regime, and more.[16] Another important contribution is seen in the focus on the Iraqi education system during Saddam Hussein's reign. This, for example, is seen in her disagreement with a claim, raised on one of the Al-Jazeera television programs, that the Iraqi universities were accessible only to children of Baath party members, and that they rejected other citizens: "Strangely enough, I wasn't a Ba'athist and I got accepted into one of the best colleges in the country based solely on my grades in my final year of high school. None of

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[15] Al-Atraqchi, "Iraqi Blogger Documents History."

[16] Riverbend calls the new Iraqi regime a 'puppet government' because "everyone, almost, are allies of one of the foreign governments or intelligence agencies or others… None of them expresses a real interest in the needs of Iraq… They are all busy lining their pockets to prepare for themselves a comfortable retirement […] abroad." *Ibid.*

my friends were Ba'athists and they ended up pharmacists, doctors, dentists, translators and lawyers… I must have been living somewhere else."[17] According to Riverbend, the state continued to maintain high standards of education, despite the international sanctions which were being applied to Iraq during the time of Saddam Hussein. The equality between men and women during that period was more advanced, in her view, when compared to that of neighboring countries.[18]

In addition, the blog contains a lot of information on a variety of topics related to Iraqi culture and society. For example, the way the locals celebrate the traditional holidays (such as the month of Ramadan and the festival of sacrifice), the observance of Shiite rituals which were forbidden during the Saddam Hussein period, a discussion on the increased tension between the Sunnite and Shiite communities, etc. The blog also contains links for downloading Iraqi music files, Iraqi food recipes and more.

As a result of these and other types of content the blog achieved high viewer percentages, particularly in the western world, and this is seen in many ways. In 2005 the blog's contents were "rescued" from the internet so that they could be published in a two volume novel: *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq.*[19] The book was released thanks to a joint initiative of the British and American publishing companies Marion Boyars[20] and the Feminist Press[21] respectively. Not only was the blog published, but in March 2005 the contents of the blog were made into a play which performed in New York, Maine, Portland and the Edinburgh Fringe festival.[22] The German theater group Freiburg[23] was also inspired by the contents of the blog and in April 2009 the group made them into a play. The performance is still being staged in Germany and Switzerland, and is about the travails of the average citizen in Iraq in the shadow of the American conquest during 2003-2007. The play's producer even complimented the writing style and the blog's contents when he noted that it is: "characterized by a precise and accurate description of the events, the feelings and the atmosphere in which the [blog's] owner

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[17] September 16, 2003,
http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/2003_08_24_riverbendblog_archive.html.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, (N.Y.: First Feminist Press edition, 2005); Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, (N.Y.: First Feminist Press edition, 2006). Also the contents of the blog *Where is Raed?* Were published as a book: Salam Pax, *The Baghdad Blog*, (London: Atlantic/Guardian Books, 2003).

[20] http://www.marionboyars.co.uk/Amy%20individual%20book%20info/Baghdad%20Burning.html.

[21] http://www.feministpress.org/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=flypage-ask.tpl&product_id=131&category_id=62&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=40.

[22] "Baghdad Burning Online was Nominated for a British Literary Prize," *Al-Jazeera*, March 29, 2006. In: http://www.aljazeera.net/News/archive/archive?ArchiveId=319546.

[23] The home page of the German theater group: http://www.theater.freiburg.de.

lived, which meticulously extolled the suffering from all perspectives, political, social, cultural and economic."[24] The blog was awarded some significant monetary awards, one for the amount of £30,000.[25]

In conclusion, it is possible to state that the blogs serve as another means of communicating local history, voicing new opinions, and presenting a unique perspective. And, although the blog bears the personal mark of the author it is also an important window to and a stage for authentic voices. Also, the blogs can be considered an alternative to the traditional media, which is capable of reaching "remote" areas that the traditional outlets are incapable of reaching, or are unaware of whether intentionally or unintentionally. The Iraqi blog *Baghdad Burning* is the perfect example of this in all respects and is gifted with a rare unique perspective – the feminine voice of Iraq.

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[24] Tāmer Abu Al-'Aynayn, "Baghdad Burning: A German Play from an Anonymous Iraqi Blog," *Al-Jazeera*, April 28, 2009. In: http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/EC377144-080E-42A2-98A5-31DDCE4F0968.htm.
[25] *Ibid*.