Being a crazy Girl in Post-Invasion Iraq: HNK’s story of youth and war

Perri Campbell
Department of Behavioural Studies
Monash University

Word Count: 3306
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Abstract:

In the aftermath of the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003 Iraqi civilians of various religious, ethnic, tribal, social and economic identities have witnessed their country descend into profound and often deadly chaos. Al-Azzawi (2008: 6) suggests ‘the dismantling of Iraqi security forces and police led to an increase in violence and crimes against women. Women are no longer leaving their homes unaccompanied by the relatives’. Children are often being kept at home, and they may only attend school on one or two days a week due to unpredictable outbursts of violence (Webb, 2006). In this paper I introduce the voice of one young blogger, HNK who writes a www based diaries on life in post invasion Iraq, and who forms part of what has become known as the Iraq war blog-o-sphere. I identify and discuss HNK’s weblog as an empowering practise of the self via the use of Michel Foucault’s latter work on the care of the self and governmentality. I propose that her practise of a digital self articulates a particular story that contributes to the unauthorized, unofficial histories of the Iraq war emerging from cyberspace.

Key words: post-Invasion Iraq, women, weblog, youth, Foucault.
Being a crazy Girl in Post-Invasion Iraq: HNK’s story of youth and war

I want to be a normal girl, living a normal life. Not this girl who is sitting in front of the computer, writing a diary and trying to be such a funny, lovely girl. I want to take off hnk’s nickname and I want to throw out her bad memories and I want to clean her heart from pain and I want just to be myself and just to talk to myself and just to hear my voice and just to play my role (HNK, Monday October 22, 2007).

In the aftermath of the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003 Iraqi civilians of various religious, ethnic, tribal, social and economic identities have witnessed their country descend into profound and often deadly chaos. In the industrialised, liberal democracies of the West – some of which have been members of the so-called Coalition of the Willing – a variety of technologies (TV, print, www) have provided a window into this chaos. Weblogs offer an alternative entry point for understanding life in post-Invasion Iraq and form a digital-democratic frontier, in a country where many freedoms are now somewhat virtual. In this paper I intend to introduce the voice of HNK, a young blogger who writes a www based diary on life in post invasion Iraq, and who forms part of what has become known as the Iraq war blog-o-sphere.

HNK narrates her life in post-Invasion Iraq along with fellow Iraq war-bloggers Aunt Najma (HNK’s sister), Sunshine, Maas (HNK’s best friend) and well known blogger Riverbend. These are the voices of Iraqi women who have positioned themselves in digital wilderness of cyberspace. Through HNK’s voice – and the voices of many other bloggers – different fragments of the reality of post-Invasion Iraq enter the globalised, disruptive, digital spaces of cyberspace, creating what I will call ‘digital selves’: selves written and practiced in spaces that are in many ways different to the
spaces of the family, the market place, and the office in which the women practice a different self.

In this paper I identify and discuss the self that HNK practises via the use of Michel Foucault’s latter work on the care of the self and governmentality. My aim is not to present a true account of what it means to be a woman in post-Invasion Iraq. HNK’s weblog provides a real-time, unfolding, reflexive, and often inter-active window into certain life-worlds and selves that moves and exists in tension between a variety of digital and non digital spaces (the distinctions between ‘virtual’ and ‘non virtual’, ‘cyber’ and ‘real’ are less that useful in naming these spaces). Her practise of a digital self articulates a particular story that contributes to the unauthorized, unofficial histories of the Iraq war emerging from cyberspace.

In what follows I present a necessarily brief analysis of key gender aspects of Iraq’s modern history, and of some of the key developments after the US led invasion in 2003. This background will contextualise my discussion of the emergence of a digital space known as the Iraq war blog-o-sphere and the digital voice of HNK. At this stage I will develop Foucault’s framework to suggest that blogging provides young women such as HNK with the opportunity to develop and deploy different practices of the self in cyberspace (Foucault 1983).
Iraq, History and Women’s Rights

The period following the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the supposed arrival of democracy and freedom has been overwhelmingly characterised by waves of violence and social, economic and political chaos across large areas of the country. The nature, shape and consequences of this chaos are complex – and a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper (see: Abdela 2005; Al-Janabi 2006; Efrati 2005; Shadid 2003). However, I can sketch key gender events in Saddam and post-Saddam Iraq that contribute to my understanding of women’s experience.

Many sources indicate that during the rule of Saddam Hussein, women in Iraq fought for and benefited from one of the most permissive societies in the Middle East (see: Al-Azzawi 2008; Al-Jawaheri, 2008: 135; 4; Judd 2006). Iraqi born Al-Jawaheri (2008: 141) argues that as a consequence of the Invasion of Iraq women are being pushed back into the domestic realm, and being encouraged to subscribe to the ideology of conservative Islamic groups. Lasky (2007: 8) argues that the current concern for women is ‘insecurity’: ‘just to walk the streets, particularly in urban areas, exposes women daily to the possibility of random violence, assault, kidnapping or death at the hands of suicide bombers, occupying forces and contractors, Iraqi police and National Guard or local thugs’.

Iraq’s youth are suffering in different ways. Children, young men and women, are often being kept at home, and may only attend school on one or two days a week due to unpredictable outbursts of violence (Webb, 2006). Stern (in Buckingham, 2008: 97) argues that social experiences during youth are pivotal for locating ones role in
greater society, as ‘adolescents frequently look to their social world for cues about what principles and traits to internalise… as self-doubts about beliefs and values are overcome, prompting late adolescents to focus more on their futures (who will I be?)’

For young women like HNK, important developmental and social experiences such as meeting friends and education continue to be a hazardous and limited. HNK is often housebound, she writes: ‘I want the old day to come back. I want to see the moon, to see the sky afternoon’ (Monday, October 22, 2007).

In the context of this chaos a number of commentators have argued that Iraqi women ‘have not merely been passive victims but have had agency and have reacted resourcefully to, adopted and coped with changing living conditions, state policies, laws and wars’ (Al-Ali 2007: 267). Western social science and feminism in particular, have a long and complex relationship with Muslim women. The ways in which Western discourses have been able to represent and depict Islam and women’s rights and experiences have been heavily criticised (Treacher & Shukrallah 2005).

Considering this relationship, my role as a narrator, as co-producer of the particular story I tell here, enters into complex territory. In the process of arranging and re-telling HNK’s story, I exercise an authorial voice which consciously reshapes her narrative (Brettell in Reed-Danahay 1997: 226). However, it is HNK who sets the terms of representation with her own story.

Cyberspace is a location in which HNK can tell her story; respond critically to social and political change in Iraq, and to global forces that impinge upon their lives. HNK’s weblog is one of many, that critiques the everyday ramifications of political decisions made in Iraq’s Green Zone (a safe fortified village in Baghdad), the trials of youth, of
being and growing up female in Iraq. Stern and boyd (in Buckingham, 2008: 96) both argue that for young people like HNK, online publications offer important opportunities for ‘managing the complex situations and shifting self-expectations that characterize adolescence’, and for participating in ‘crucial developmental tasks’ such as communication and affiliation (boyd in Buckingham, 2008: 3). Weblogs are a site for ‘self-reflection, releasing pent up feelings’, and observing personal growth when offline spaces are less than hospitable; ‘online genres provide relatively safe opportunities for youth authors to present what feels like an authentic self-presentation, even when it conflicts with or departs from their ‘everyday’ self’ (Stern in Buckingham, 2008: 108). In the following section I will suggest how Foucault’s latter work is useful for further understanding the intricacies of ‘self-expectation’, ‘personal growth’ and ‘self-presentation’ in digital and non-digital spaces.

**Writing the digital-Self**

My fieldwork exploring cyberspace takes place within the Iraqi blog-o-sphere. Foucault offers useful tools for imagining how bloggers might practice a self in digital spaces. I deploy a number of Foucault’s concepts: *relations of power, technologies of the self, practices of the self, and fields of possibility*, to provide a framework through which I can locate both, my position as researcher and the weblogs created by Iraqi women.

The key concept here is that the market place, the office, the university, the family, the blog, can be understood as different, distinct, but often related fields of possibilities in which a self is shaped and practiced. These different fields – and the
different power relations, tribal, religious, gender and age relations that give shape and structure to these fields, and which emerge from these fields – can be analysed to explore the ways in which digital spaces and other areas of young women’s lives constitute particular fields of possibilities for practicing the self. In this sense I will argue that blogging, writing a self in digital spaces, offers HNK the possibility of practicing a self that is different, though related, to the self she practices in the family, the marketplace, the university (Foucault 1997: 291).

In his later work Foucault (1997: 291) developed a concern with what he termed technologies and practices of the self. He argued that these concepts provided a useful means for imagining how individuals are encouraged to know and understand themselves within the regulatory confines of particular historical, social and political spaces (Foucault 2000: 87). Technologies of the self suggest and define what it means to be the ‘right’ kind of person in a given community, at a particular time and what one’s corresponding behaviour should be (Foucault 1988: 15). The argument here is that these technologies of the self – in all their regularity and diversity – give shape to distinct but related fields of possibilities.

Practices of the self are models the individual finds in his or her culture that are ‘proposed, suggested, imposed’ upon the individual (Foucault 1997: 291). Though they may seem restrictive, practices of the self offer a practical system for ‘the critique of what we are’; by choosing to behave in one way and not the other subjects critique themselves and their environment. In this way we can understand ourselves as *active* subjects of the conditions in which we live (Foucault 1994: 319).
The key to this formulation is relations of power. Foucault argued that ‘power’ exists only as exercised by some on others, that power is something that is exercised upon and through individuals (Foucault 1984: 340). The manner in which an individual chooses to practice him or herself is laden with the possibility of negotiating power to his or her benefit. How power can be enacted is not limited to particular practices. The idea of fields of possibilities gestures towards the ways in which the self and relations of power are produced: fields are never entirely open, nor are they totally restricted. Fields of possibility are shaped, regulated, governed and energised by a multiplicity of relationships of gender, class, ethnicity and religion.

Weblogs, as digital fields of possibility offer some Iraqi women the possibility of writing and practising a self: a self that emerges in tension with the self that emerges from other fields of possibility such as, the family, the workplace, the market, and the religious or tribal group. By focusing upon particular spaces – such as the workplace or digital space – as fields of possibilities, I am able to investigate the logic and social expectations influencing the forms of self that individuals are expected to practice in diverse fields. This digital process does not occur independently of other fields in the individual’s life; there is a continuous interaction between digital and non-digital experiences, meanings, expectations and identities. For instance, Stern (in Buckingham, 2008: 108) suggests that young authors can use their ‘personal sites to explore ways to present in public versions of themselves that may be stifled – for various reasons – in other settings’. In what follows I will illustrate how, in the production of HNK’s weblog, I see diverse practices of the self framed by sometimes complimentary and contradictory ‘fields of possibilities’ (Foucault 1994: 341).
Youth, War and HNK: Being a crazy girl in post-Invasion Iraq

My dreams are huge and they grow up everyday. And that’s scare me. Because no dreams come true in Iraq and this is my problem. I love my country and I can’t leave it. I want to play my part in this life but I can’t do that in my county. However, this mean that my country is my problem and that’s something I can’t admit it. Being an ignorant girl is not my choice. I want to be someone…

‘My weblog owns 43.75 % of me. Does your weblog own you?’ (HNK, Saturday June 11, 2005).

The story of HNK provides a window through which I can glimpse life in Iraq and how this life’s limitations and freedoms differ between various digital and non-digital fields. HNK discusses contradictory experiences of violence, happiness, loneliness, fear, and uncertainty, all experienced in/between the fields of the family home, the school, the University, the market place and the blogosphere. Her stories are integral to this project not because they are representative of other women’s experiences in Iraq, but because they present highly reflexive, personalised fragments of reality in war torn Iraq. They enable me to map various fields of possibility in which Iraqi women produce and practise a self. In the following analysis I focus upon HNK’s entries from January 01, 2006 to January 01, 2008.

In the year I write this paper, HNK is an 18 year old woman living in Iraq; she has been the author of ‘Iraqi girl blog’ (or ‘HNK’s blog’) for 5 years. Following HNK’s weblog over this time I have encountered stories about post-Invasion chaos, mixed with the trials of her adolescence, her attempts to achieve almost perfect results at school, and negotiate a balance between academic pursuits, family and friends. HNK’s blog records significant events, such as Ramadan, family gatherings, school projects, awards, sibling rivalry and darker moments when the war directly affects her
and her family members. Her blog is her space for critical self-reflection; it is a location where events are narrated as moments of elation, achievement, despair, fear and competition. HNK’s narrative tone, text and language combine to imbue the space, the digital-field of her blog with a sense of urgency, uncertainty and determination.

HNK’s ‘blogography’ (‘about me’ section) introduces HNK to the reader by focusing on one of HNK’s primary dilemmas, that ‘no dreams come true in Iraq’, not her dreams for the future or dreams of youth. HNK feels she is missing out on her childhood (Sunday, June 11, 2006) – her chance to be young and careless:

I can swear that this war changes my life 80-degree. I am 16 years old. I should live the happiest part of my life; I must be a crazy girl doing foolish and stupid things while I am not. I am talking like some one in 35. I feel I am nothing, I do nothing in my life and I going to do nothing (HNK Friday, February 24, 2006).

The incentive to be a crazy girl doing foolish things in Iraq indicates HNK’s determination to live her adolescent years in what she considers a ‘normal’ fashion. The ‘crazy girl’ formula is part of HNK’s becoming a woman: ‘an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions’ (Butler 2004: 26). She is angry and frustrated that her life is not what she thinks it should be. She craves time for youth, for herself and for her friends. She voices her fear that her adolescence (and that of her friends) may be coming to an abrupt end, by contrasting the unfolding lives of her engaged friends with idea of the ‘young girl’: for HNK the ‘young girl’ does not get engaged:
well, I was so surprise this year when I knew that 2 girls from my class get married and another 2 girls get engage. And here I have to stop and shout: hey, Am I the only one who still have a pink room with bears on her bed and Barby toys in her drawer? (HNK, Thursday October 12 2006)

HNK does not discuss her motivation to live her youth as a ‘crazy girl’, perhaps this encouragement comes from a multitude of influences, such as her parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers and global elements such as the Harry Potter stories and Gilmore Girls TV series she says she is addicted to. Harris (2005: 41) suggests young women’s bodies are governed and been commodified through a ‘discourse of desire’. This discourse seeks to promote family planning at the ‘right’ time – when women are in their 30s. Harry Potter’s ‘childhood as fantasy’ and Gilmore Girls exploration of teen mothers are but two sources that define a ‘right’ time for family planning, a time-plan HNK prefers over other prescriptions she has encountered through her friends.

HNK ‘the crazy girl’ exists with different intensities across different fields. School is an important area in HNK’s life; here she reconciles her urge to be young and careless with her academic and scholarly goals to be a ‘top student’. At school HNK is a high achiever in a space where she says she can be relatively ‘free’. However, her behaviour takes on different dimensions in the presence of male teachers. She writes:

So, Today I went for my first course in chemist for the 6th grade. The teacher who teach us chemist is a man. In school all our teachers are women. So we are not use to this.
Now, we have to be polite and a good student. It's hard for me, you know!
In school we are all girls, we jump and cry and do what ever we want (we are free) (HNK, Thursday Aril 22, 2006).
HNK does not expect to play the role of the ‘crazy girl’ in the class room; in this space she is encouraged to achieve academically (Tuesday, February 21, 2006). These prescriptions or technologies create a sense of how HNK can, and should act.

In her blog HNK attempts to make sense of her experiences at school through ‘self-reflection and self-inquiry’ (Stern in Buckingham, 2008: 99). Her digital-self is a confessional, highly reflexive critique of her encounters in post-invasion Iraq that she deems ‘un-normal’: violent, chaotic, and insecure. HNK scrutinises her self, her experiences and her body through the competing and contradictory stories of her weblog. Her blog is place where she can question the pressure to forgo experimental behaviour, and the careless security of being young, and ‘wine for the little things that don’t deserve to be mention’ (HNK, Friday February 29, 2008). It is a space in which she can play out the role of a crazy young woman carving out a path by asking ‘who am I’ and ‘who will I be?’ HNK’s digital self takes up, and claims as its own a textual space where she can tell her story of growing up in post-invasion Iraq.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have suggested that digital spaces provide HNK with a space for situated social criticism; for contesting and disagreeing with the pressures and encouragements she experiences in various fields of possibility. HNK practices a self that she cannot, or does not want to, in other fields. By writing, creating, enacting a different self in her weblogs she is bringing a different self into being – a self that questions and negotiates the array of technologies of the self that seek to conduct her behaviour at home, and at school. In this paper I have provided a partial, limited, but
nonetheless revealing translation of what it means to be a young woman in post-
Invasion Iraqi. I read fragments of HNK’s self from her digital-stories and in doing so
I read the predicaments she is faced with, the choices she makes, and the self she
practices as always in construction. The war has affected HNK’s life in profound
ways – for HNK being a crazy girl is mediated by a combination of bombs, study,
fear, uncertainty, a determination to live and ‘blogging to survive’ (HNK, Friday July
28, 2006).

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