

The Impact of Information Technology on Social Relationships Within and Among Jordanian Families: An Anthropological Study, Irbid, Jordan.

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Abstract

In recent years, terms such as globalization, transnationalism and multiculturalism have become widespread in the social sciences in general and anthropology in particular. They are most commonly employed as tools for trying to grasp the specificity of the contemporary moment. In today's world, people, commodities, technology, capital, and ideas are constantly flowing at an unprecedented rate across national and cultural borders.

This paper is primarily concerned with the adoption and adaptation of information technology (IT) in general and cell phones in particular by Jordanians. It focuses on the influence of IT on the social structure and social values of Jordanian families.

Ethnographic evidences demonstrate that IT has largely contributed to reshaping people's notions of family, time, place and community.

Keywords: Jordan, information technology, cell phones, family, social relationships.

الملخص:

في السنوات الأخيرة ، أصبحت مصطلحات مثل transnationalism ، والعولمة والتعددية الثقافية على نطاق واسع في مجال العلوم الاجتماعية بصفة عامة والأنثروبولوجيا على وجه الخصوص. هي الأكثر شيوعا واستخدامها كأدوات لمحاولة فهم خصوصية هذه اللحظة المعاصرة. في عالم اليوم، والأشخاص والسلع والتكنولوجيا ورأس المال، والأفكار تتدفق باستمرار بمعدل لم يسبق له مثيل عبر الحدود الوطنية والثقافية. وفي هذه الورقة في المقام الأول مع اعتماد وتطويع تكنولوجيا المعلومات في العام والهواتف المحمولة وبخاصة عن طريق الأردنيين. ويركز التقرير على تأثير تكنولوجيا المعلومات على البنية الاجتماعية والقيم الاجتماعية للأسر الأردنية.

الأدلة الإثنوغرافية تثبت أنها أسهمت إلى حد كبير في إعادة تشكيل المفاهيم الشعبية ، والأسرة الزمان والمكان والمجتمع.

كلمات البحث: الأردن ، وتكنولوجيا المعلومات، والهواتف الخلوية، والأسرة، والعلاقات الاجتماعية.

Introduction:

From a postmodern perspective, the consumption of products, images, or lifestyles is not conceived of as a pure and exclusive economic activity, but rather as a cultural practice which can produce and/or dissolve identities, rework cultural practices, or introduce new meanings and practices. This implies the need to investigate the cultural politics of people's consumer practices. People seem to make sense of their own places within the world at large through consumption practices. This explains why the cultural dimensions of consumption, as a topic of research, have been placed high on the anthropological agenda.

During the last two decades, Jordan has witnessed a major transformation in the realm of information technology, particularly the introduction of the internet and the cell phones. Generally speaking, information technology is currently considered one of the major inventions ever to happen throughout history. It has made the individual's social circle wider and easier to access. Within the same context, the local household, which is considered the main link with this global means of communication, is crucial to any human activity including work, learning, and political and economic behavior. This clearly attests to the idea that forces of globalization have reshaped our collectively held dispositions and notions of space. For example, Dirlik (1996) argues that the local and the global should not be understood as dichotomies separated in time and space as they are inextricably bound together.

In light of this, this paper seeks to examine the multifaceted impact of this recent means of communication on social relationships within the same family as well as among different families. Ethnographic data discussed in this paper were collected through an anthropological study conducted in different parts of the city of Irbid, northern Jordan, during the period 2003-2006.

Studying the socio-cultural aspects of information technology requires addressing the meaning of family and social relationships on the one hand and the link between information technology and society on the other. Once such issues are addressed, we can move forward to deal with questions about the specific impact of information technology upon the family and the ways families themselves have adapted IT to suit their own purposes.

The earlier brands of the telephone, which was invented by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876 and has continuously developed into what is known today as the Mobile/Cell phone, were introduced to Jordan during the early 1980s. Unlike the fixed home phone which is used by the whole family, the cell phone is designed to suit the individual's needs. This means that cell phones are personalized and they provide users with both intimacy and mobility. However, it can be argued that the social values and meanings people attach to cell phones are vital if one to understand the socio-cultural

dimensions of the use of cell phones. This attests to the fact that people can be viewed as active rather than passive users as they constantly tend to construct and circulate a variety of social and cultural meanings. Scholars like Hannerz (1996) have stressed the agency of consumers to select and adapt products according to their own desires, knowledge and interests. Put another way, consumers are no longer depicted as victims or at the mercy of consumer culture. They manipulate products by imposing their own systems of values and practices.

The Concept of Family

As many kinship concepts, the concept of family- and its various forms such as nuclear family, extended family, compound family, and conjugal family- is elusive and difficult to define. This is so obvious within the realm of Jordanian kin concepts and groups. If we are to develop one general definition for each type of family, we will be faced with a wide range of thoughts and theories that have been employed in this field for a long time. Moreover, any definition of family should take into account the process of networking of people and relationships. To solve this dilemma, it would be better to use the operational definition of the household as “a group of people living together under one roof and who have common goals and share the domestic economy and facilities (Schusky Manual for Kinship Analysis: Second Edition 1994). On the other hand, Richard Antoun (1977) defines “household” as “a group of people that shares a common shelter and maintains a common purse that household members contribute to and take from in order to pay common expenses.” Such definition is useful because it enables us to distinguish “household IT resources” (such as television, computer, and fixed telephone line) and “individual IT resources” (such as cell phones). Such distinction between “household IT resources” and “individual IT resources” can be found in almost all societies and applies equally to Jordan.

Anthropologists recognize that a “family” consists of a group of people who are related by consanguinity (حسب), affinity (نسب), or ritual kinship (adoption or الخوة بالرضاعة مثلاً). In Jordan, a “family” consists of people who are all descended from a single man through the male line, plus the women who are married to those men. In other societies like the American society, “family” refers to a group of people who can trace consanguineal relationships with each other through both men and women from any of a large number of “ancestors,” plus the men and women married to any of those ancestors or to any of their descendants.

The link between Society and Information Technology

In light of the intensified and rapid revolution in information technology, several social and cultural changes have taken place on both

individual and collective levels. Such changes represent the main focus of this paper. People have increasingly come to depend on recent means of communication in their different activities. Developed means of communication have become deeply imbedded in people's socio-cultural and economic contexts. They are considered an integral part of every Jordanian's socio-cultural and economic daily practices. Put another way, there is a mutual influence between social relationships and networks on one hand and telecommunications within the Jordanian society on the other. The extension of one side leads ultimately to flourishing of the other.

A case in point here is that every new technology, including cell phones, has both negative and positive effects on people's lives and activities. Among the negative effects is that the use of the cell phone can result in a "total lack of private time" by the person carrying the mobile (Davis 1993: 647). People feel obliged to answer their cell phones no matter where they are and when they receive the phone call. Similarly, Gillard et al (1994) point out that the issue of private time is an important concern when it comes to the use of cell phones. Most people interviewed in this study expressed how it is sometimes difficult to separate between the workplace and home life due to the intensive use of the cell phone. In an attempt to enable people to enjoy their private time, phone companies provide users with the service of blocking and registering the incoming calls without answering them.

Furthermore, many scholars suggest that technology and information technology may contribute to weakening some of the existing social values and norms. Postman (1992), for instance, suggests that technology erodes social values such as respect for the wisdom of the elderly. Values of family unity and morality, transmitted across many generations, will be replaced by a fascination with technology. The ability to communicate across distance gives a further rationale for the separation of families.

Many interviewed people have stressed the deep impact of IT on the moral and social norms and values. Its adoption is not cost-free. Undermining the moral system in the society seems to be a major concern for most people. IT has introduced many foreign values and practices into society.

Socio-Cultural Meanings of Cell-Phones

The practice of consumption is no longer viewed as the end process of the economic cycle. It constantly produces images, experiences, identities and meanings. In this context, scholars have examined the dynamic relationship between consumption and identity construction. Consumers are now depicted as identity-seekers. Thus, the consumed commodity plays a crucial role in defining the consumer. As many scholars have pointed out, shopping is not merely the acquisition of things; it is the buying of identity. In the current world, which is dominated by a high degree of fetishism, people consume the images and signs attached to commodities. Baudrillard

(1988) argues that consumption entails that active manipulation of signs which has become central to the late capitalist society where sign and commodity have come together to produce the “commodity-sign.” This demonstrates how images have become central to the postmodern world of culture as material cultures are not connected directly to the demands of daily life. Instead, they are converted to signs and images

In regard to cell phones, Jordanians tend to develop and circulate their own meanings, images, and uses. Examining the Jordanian popular discourse will particularly reveal such varied meanings and images. The table below shows the different names (in brackets) people use for the different brands of cell phones:

Local Name	Serial Number	Brand Name
DJ	3300	NOKIA
N-Gage		NOKIA
Apache	6260	NOKIA
Elegant (El Aneeq)	6220	NOKIA
Bear (El Doub)	6600	NOKIA
Siemens Bear (Doub El Siemens)	SX1	SIEMENS
Crazy Writer (Mahwus belkitabah)	6820	NOKIA
Water drop (El nuqtah)	7600	NOKIA
The Easy (El Sahel)	3100	NOKIA
Howler (El awaieh)	1100	NOKIA
Hummer (El Hummer)	6630	NOKIA
Tear 1 (Dema'a 1)	7610	NOKIA
Tear 2 (Dema'a 2)	6670	NOKIA
Baby Bear (baby El doub)	3220	NOKIA
Jack (al Keiahl)	3230	NOKIA
The fetus (Khadaj)	8310	NOKIA
The baby	8210	NOKIA
I Pictured you (Sawartak)	3200	NOKIA

Conspicuous Consumption

Veblen's (1973) idea of conspicuous consumption seems to be useful in understanding most Jordanians' consumer practices. He notes how the leisure class seeks to display their wealth and status by conspicuous consumer practices as they consume for reasons that go far beyond subsistence. This implies that people seek to define themselves and their class locations through the commodities they consume. Unlike Veblen who stresses the importance of material goods in the display of status and taste,

Bourdieu (1984) focuses on the possession of symbolic and capital goods, and thus notes a clear connection between class structure and consumer practices. He examines the centrality of consumption practices in the creation and maintenance of social relationships of domination and submission.

When buying cell phones, most Jordanians seem to care much about the brand which reflects the prestige and status of the owner. Teenagers in particular place much emphasis on the brand and accessories of the phone. This demonstrates that the consumption of cell phones functions as a marker of social differentiation.

Information Technology as Used by Families

General Patterns

The general uses of the different forms of information technology in the Jordanian society have undergone major transformations throughout history. What was once considered a luxury commodity is now considered popular. In his model of "trickle-down," Simmel (1957) argues that commodity consumption embodies the contradictory tendencies of imitation and differentiation. When lower classes imitate upper classes in their consumer practices, the latter turn a way from the existing styles and adopt new ones in an attempt to differentiate themselves from the former.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a whole village or a big town in Jordan may have one big 'talk box radio'. However, today almost every room in every house has a radio device used for different purposes. On the other hand, the TV set has become a necessary piece of furniture in almost every Jordanian household. It is no exaggeration to claim that most houses have more than one set. It may seem interesting to mention that Jordanians pay monthly fees with every monthly electricity bill known as "TV tax".

Fifteen years ago, the possession of a fixed home-telephone line was considered a symbol of belonging to a high class and enjoying a modern lifestyle. Part of the reason was due to the fact that the telephone line was very expensive and there was no developed infrastructure for such service in the country. Installing a phone line required the use of much influence and personal connection (*wasta*). In contrast, the access to a telephone line has become easier and does not take a long time.

As far as the internet is concerned, more and more people are increasingly having internet access in their homes. Moreover, the use of computers for educational purposes- at homes and in schools- attests to the rising attention given to information technology by the Jordanian government.

One could easily argue that cell phones in Jordan have become so popular to the extent that the same person may have more than one phone or line. Statistics about people who have cell phones varies but shows that the great majority of Jordanians have at least one phone.

No matter where you are in the country you could see people using cell phones.

Generally speaking, the head of the family is the one who has the right to control access to cell phones inside the house, and the one who sets the rules about phone calls. During certain social occasions, especially religious ones, phone calls are usually scorned. In sum, the use of cell phone- like other forms of IT- is governed by social restrictions, regulations and rules.

As has been mentioned before, the use of cell phones has made connection among people easier. It helps construct and strengthen social relationships and networks. Therefore, the ways Jordanians have adapted cell phones to suit their values and practices demonstrate the huge impact of information technology upon social relations. Katz (2003) examines the importance of peer support. He predicts that the new information technology and the new horizons of telecommunications will provide a wider interactivity and more connectivity between wider and more diverse groups of society. The same argument could be made about the use of cell phones by the extended family. Research has shown that extended families in Jordan are connected to each other by a network of help, advice, and support. Extended families are important especially in times of illness, child care, and economic help. The cell phone can provide such services.

Ethnographic data indicate that most phone calls (almost 69%) are made between members of the extended family, mainly to transmit their personal and social feelings to each other, provide financial assistance, offer help and advice, and food. Phone use does not necessarily have to be purpose-orientated as it often serves just as a tool to sustain a close relationship between family members and a link between households. The following are examples of the conversations between members of the extended family:

- *“Grandma, I would like to tell you that my dad bought me a computer game; It’s about the war. I will play this game today and I will see what happens on this game” (a boy talking to his grandmother)*
- *“Dad, I know you are good in making your guest very comfortable in your house, I have a friend who is coming to visit me. Would you like to tell me how I should treat him. Should I make him a big meal or just tea, coffee and some fruits?” (a married son talking to his father).*
- *“Tell them that I will be little bit late, the university bus has a flat tire, and they need some time to fix it, ... may be one hour or more, I don’t know. I will be home as soon as they fix it” (two sisters talking to each other).*

Empowering Women

Generally speaking, information and communication technology has played a vital role in empowering women. It has provided them with opportunities to express themselves and overcome many barriers posed by the existing patriarchal socio-cultural system. For instance, the new means of telecommunications have introduced what might be called "remote" socialization. It is mediated by technology and has largely replaced the face-to-face interactions. Jordanian women exchange and circulate news through cell phones rather than through daily visits, though they might be spatially close. Another dimension of women's use of cell phones is the construction of identity. Cell phones can be seen as a source of independence, self-esteem and security for women. For the Jordanian working woman, the cell phone is the best tool for maintaining and sustaining relationships with other female friends (Moyal 1992). Many researchers (Rakow and Navarro 1993; Davis 1993; Plant 2000) have found that the mobile /cell phone provides women with a sense of freedom as they can perform independent activities and yet remain connected with their families and the society in general. The flexibility of the cell phone gives women more fluid and different roles in society. This can be clearly noticed at work and home. Women can handle more than one activity at the same time (Appadurai 1996; Rakow and Navarro 1993). An interviewed woman described the mobile/ cell phones as "a great favor from God. If you need any help or you need to talk to someone you just have to press one button and then you will have access to any person anywhere."

The Phone as a Source of Security

Most of the interviewed families indicated that the cell phone represents an important source of social security. Being without a cell phone is described as being "disconnected from every thing" or "cut off from the outside world." When interviewed people were asked whether the cell phone provides them with a sense of security or not, they answered:

- *"Yes, I was scared the other day when I was walking to my home back from the university; it was almost dark; I saw a man walking on my side walk and I immediately got my cell phone and I started to talk to my family. This means that you can be very close and a way from them at the same time."*
- *"I don't know how we can live without a cell phone; you really need it in your bag or your pocket because without it you are alone. I think every one who doesn't have a cell phone should buy one. I can never think about. My brother sold his cell phone voluntarily. After one day he could not live without a phone so he went and bought a new one. He could not bear to be disconnected from the outside world."*
- *"The cell phone is my best friend. I cannot live one minute without it."*
- *"I am really addicted to the cell phone. I'd give up food or smoking before I'd give up the cell phone."*

Domestic organization

Families use the cell phone to organize domestic activities and practices. For instance, a married couple uses the cell phone to arrange daily activities such as children pickups from school, shopping, social visits, and car pooling. In sum, interaction between family members is largely mediated by the cell phone. The following example illustrates this point:

"I usually pick up the children from school, but if I get really busy and cannot do it I call my wife and let her know. This proves to you that the cell phone is really a must. You now need it in almost every daily activity." (Salim, male, 24 years old)

A Means of Entertainment

Like the computer, the cell phone has been adapted into a means of entertainment rather than just a means of telecommunication. This demonstrates how consumers tend to manipulate products and to recontextualize them in different symbolic spheres from those in which they were produced. Many of the interviewed people assured that "you can go to game icon on the cell phone and you can entertain yourself. There is lot that can be done on the phone such as building up a web site or a home page or playing with power point program and many other programs. You can also download games for any age, and any kind of game you like. To tell the truth I think the cell phone has many similarities with the computer."

Information Technology and the Future of Jordanian Families**Physical Isolation or Soul Unification**

As shown by an advertisement on an American T.V. station, information technology will soon be able to do so many things inside and outside homes. It will dominate almost every realm of our life and every daily practice. Many economists and humanists predict that humans will be isolated in their homes in the future as the space will be dominated by machines. The home will be totally an autonomous unit with no need for interaction with the wider community. Certain activities such as shopping, education, and work can all be done by home computers. Due to the personalization of communications (the personal computer, the walkman, the mobile phone), it is expected that individuals will be alienated from other members of the community. This seems to resonate with what Karl Marx (1990) calls the "alienation" of the capitalist worker from the commodity produced, the means of production, the society, and even from himself.

For example, shopping is increasingly being done on the internet. With a quick click on your home computer you can purchase any commodity or product you wish. You order it, pay for it, and receive it without leaving your home desk.

On the other hand, the recent advancements in information technology have made it possible for people to perform their work duties on their home computers. Thus, the workplace has shifted to inside the house. Within this context, advocates of gender equality and feminist movements may have to rethink their ideologies of liberating women from the private domain and to provide them with a sense of freedom to construct an identity outside the house.

Private and Public Access

Information technology may make it easier for the public to have access to personal or private information. This could lead to a major violation of personal or collective privacy. It can also mislead the public as it provides the person with the privilege of providing vague or wrong information. New telecommunications which offer greater accessibility with full sound and vision may lead to the blurring of the public and private spheres (Hearn et al 1993, 33). Many researchers indicate that the home is the private space where intimate and personalized matters take place. Gillard et al (1994) found that a sense of personal space, usually associated with home, affects peoples' notions of the intrusiveness of the phone and their willingness to adopt new telecommunications.

Interviewed people have demonstrated how they can dictate the phone rather than being its victims. As Jamal indicates: "I think you have to make choices when you decide to have a cell phone. It either dominates you or you dominate it. It is up to you and choices are in general in your hand."

Concluding Remarks

The history of information technology and new telecommunications is relatively short but very effective and rapid. It is indeed embedded in the social history of every society. Jordan is one of many countries that have recently witnessed rapid and major transformations in the realm of information technology. Examining people's lifestyles and practices have shown that people are continuously adapting new technological advancements to make them fit local contexts. This indicates that in the global flexible regime of capital accumulation, the meanings and images attached to a flowing commodity are never finished. They are always in the process of making as the commodity passes through the different locations of production, distribution and consumption.

As has been discussed throughout this paper, information technology in general and cell phones in particular have had a deep impact on the socio-cultural context of the Jordanian family. They have greatly contributed to reshaping our collectively held notions such as culture, family, community and identity. Moreover, it is highly important to examine the influence of recent advancements in information technology in relation to the social values that exist in family life as well as the society.

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