

## **Political Appivism: Constructing Israeli–Palestinian Political Experience Through App Use**

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There has been exponential growth in the use of mobile political apps. Focusing on *iNakba*, a GPS-based application that addresses the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, this study asks, How do political activists negotiate their use of apps to promote their agendas? We based our study on interviews with activists, users, and appmasters, alongside participant observation and review of supportive documents. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s discussions about authentic-mediated experiences and the “aura” of objects, we highlighted three major themes: place versus online space (user’s distinct sense of place to complement their online-app space experience), interactivity (negotiation of the relationship between the app and its users), and reaching through the layers (users’ rediscovering the “authentic” landscape). Through Benjamin’s framework, we see how apps’ technological affordances are used to construct a distinct political experience and to support amplification of appmasters’ status as providers of authentic knowledge for social movements.

*Keywords: Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Middle East, mobile applications, new media, apps*

The past decade has seen massive growth in the production, distribution, and usage of mobile apps as a key utility in everyday life (Fagerjord, 2012). This growth includes apps directed at user communication, entertainment, commerce, religion, and, of late, politics. The advent of mobile phones has

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revolutionized how users engage in communication and information sharing to a point that this experience successfully competes with, and perhaps even supersedes, all other forms (LaFrance, 2016). By entering the app world, political agents aim to propel the mobile sphere into arenas in which it can be used to advance policies and agendas. These agents may include governments that offer apps to promote state-individual communication (e-government), or bottom-up actors (NGOs, political parties, etc.) seeking to mobilize supporters and activists.

Discussions about new media and politics often describe how political agents use the properties of new media to advance their goals (Schejter & Tirosh, 2016). However, it remains unclear to what extent apps simply extend the capabilities of other online formats (e.g., political websites), or whether they are instead enabling a game-changing shift in political activity. To examine the emergent role of apps in the political sphere, we ask, How do political activists negotiate their use of apps to promote their agendas? To address this question, this study explores the case of *iNakba*—a GPS-enabled political app developed as a response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The *iNakba* app, according to its official description,<sup>2</sup> allows users to locate Palestinian villages that were destroyed during and after the 1948 war between Jewish forces and local and external Arab militaries, and to learn about their silenced history.

By revisiting Walter Benjamin's (1936/2008) theories on the relationship between original art and reproduction, and his writings on the effect of distance on the aura of the authentic, we offer an explanation of how the *iNakba* app creates meaning for users through its mediation of authenticity. Understanding the process by which political activists negotiate with an app designed and used to fulfill their political goals may in turn enhance our understanding of the role of contemporary technologies in shaping today's political sphere.

We first anchor our discussion in the context of the broader conversation about apps, new media, and political activism, and then provide a detailed description of our case study. This includes a discussion of the Palestinian *Nakba* (in Arabic, "catastrophe") and what we term "*Nakba* activism"—the attempts of activists to overcome the repression of *Nakba* memory in the Israeli political sphere. Subsequently, we introduce our revised understanding of Walter Benjamin's media theories and discuss digital representation and the authenticity of place. After a brief description of our methodology, we describe the study's main findings and conclusions.

### **New Media and Political Apps**

An app is a software program that is distributed through an integrated, monopolistic outlet (e.g., Apple's AppStore, the Google Play store) and that can be downloaded, typically to a mobile device (Fagerjord, 2015). The rise of smartphone communication has triggered exponential growth in app production, distribution, and use. Human-computer interaction scholars have underscored the functionalities of apps and have also endeavored to cultivate their technological affordances. They contend that apps are precisely tailored to meet user needs, which explains their great attractiveness and popularity (Chang, Tai, Yeh, Hsieh, & Chang, 2013; Yan & Chen, 2011). Indeed, apps are often noted for

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<sup>2</sup> <http://Zochrot.org/en/keyword/45323>

their unprecedented flexibility, efficiency, and connectivity. Not only do many individuals integrate the use of apps into their everyday lives, they also organize their lives around apps and the data and information they can access and collect via those apps (Fagerjord, 2012; Frizzo-Barker & Chow-White, 2012).

In many ways, apps embody contemporary media's unique characteristics, namely, interactivity, mobility, abundance, and multimediality (Schejter & Tirosh, 2016). However, unlike Internet-based activities (e.g., online surfing, online gaming), apps' inherent mobility enables the ready formation of bridges between online-cybernetic spaces and off-line activity. Examples of this can be seen in health and fitness apps (West et al., 2012), as well as in GPS navigation systems (Chang et al., 2013) and the like. While the integration of apps into everyday life has been noted, both policy makers and political activists are also increasingly aware of their potential for mediating knowledge and advancing ideological causes.

Because apps are most prominently used by commercial enterprises to advance economic objectives, they are often viewed as an apolitical technology (Hestres, 2013). However, scholars have noted the covert power and dominance strategies that are endemic to the historic growth of apps. An analysis of Apple's AppStore, for example, suggests that it has become a platform for conflicts where social groups compete for influence, legitimacy, and power (Hestres, 2013). According to this analysis, app market platform managers function as arbiters between competing parties. Thus, Apple uses its managers to vet political apps, and in some cases even remove them, to advance the interests of specific stakeholders. In this example, power plays a crucial role, yet is wielded covertly. In a similar vein, Power, Neville, Devereux, Haynes, and Barnes (2012) examine the Google StreetView app and assert that while the conglomerate may appear impartial, it is in fact a player in the politics of representation, stigmatization, and (in)visibility, as reflected in a case study of the app's portrayal of Moyross, Ireland. Likewise, researchers in algorithm studies who focus on geopolitical inferences have highlighted the hidden algorithmic design that is built into apps incorporating geolocalized information, referred to as "augmented reality" (Graham, Zook, & Boulton, 2013). Finally, Roth (2015) discusses the covert power plays behind the scenes at the AppStore and Google Play through policies that impact gay dating services. Accordingly, he shows how these apparent technology policies are in fact casting a veil over normative judgments about social acceptability, thereby affecting subcultural identity politics. These studies reveal hidden ideologies within apps, even in cases when positions of neutrality are implied by their producers.

While these examples demonstrate how corporate power is covertly wielded through apps, by contrast, numerous grassroots movements, political organizations, antiestablishment NGOs, and even government agencies openly exert power using political apps. For example, governments use apps to promote state services (e-government) or to direct public representation. Cunningham and Wasserstrom (2012) describe how governments use apps to promote ideology, inform citizens about current policies, and manage their public image. To this end, these authors focus on the CHINA SCIO app that was developed and is maintained by the People's Republic of China. These scholars underscore the app's significance in affirming Chinese solidarity via Apple's AppStore platform, despite widespread criticism and resistance that attest to its utility as a tool for propaganda and for reinforcing government power.

In contrast to the government apps into which political policies and messages are subtly embedded, openly political apps that are grassroots oriented and initiated by interested parties,

individuals, NGOs, and others have also emerged in the past decade. Overtly political apps that advocate specific agendas serve as tools for political expression and information (e.g., the Wikileaks Widget, Indymedia, BuyPartisan), or even offer games with political overtones, such as Punch the Trump or Kick the Importance Obama. These varieties of “apptivism”—political activism through the design and distribution of apps—clearly indicate the political utility of mobile technology in addition to its communication, information, and leisure functionalities (Cunningham & Wasserstrom, 2012).

Despite its growing popularity, the world of overtly political apps remains understudied. Furthermore, given apps’ mobile nature that distinguishes them from websites and purely “online” activities, this study focuses on the case of a specific app as an example of the mobility affordances of apps in general, shedding light on their multimodal capabilities compared with other new media tools that have emerged in the past few decades. Apps often provide a simulated experience for their users, and may function in a virtual world comparable to video games or to a “Second Life” (see Boellstorff, 2008, pp. 242–244). However, when teamed with geolocation functionalities, the simulated experience is expanded through a referential system that connects the app representation to a specific locale. This capability is highly relevant for political apps addressing locale-specific political conflicts, such as the geolocation-based app *iNakba*.

### **From the *Nakba* to the *iNakba***

Launched in 2014 by the Israeli NGO Zochrot (Hebrew for “remembering,” in female plural form), *iNakba* is a geolocation-enabled app that allows users to navigate more than 500 Palestinian towns and villages that were destroyed during and after the hostilities in the 1948 war—referred to by Palestinians as *al-Nakba* (“the catastrophe”)—and to learn about their silenced history (Tirosh, 2018).

Established in 2002, Zochrot is a local Israeli NGO promoting “acknowledgment and accountability for the ongoing injustices of the *Nakba*,” thus passing on “the moral duty to remember the Palestinian suffering and loss in 1948” (Gutman, 2017, p. 54). The organization advocates the Palestinian “right of return” as “the imperative redress of the *Nakba* and a chance for a better life for all the country’s inhabitants.” As stated by its founders, Zochrot aims to “enable people to acknowledge the loss of the Palestinians and then to take responsibility—our responsibility as Israeli Jews—for our part in this tragedy” (Shah, Bronstein, & Musih, 2007, p.34). Thus, the organization aims to engage with Jewish Israeli political activists, as well as Palestinians. As part of Zochrot’s varied mnemonic activities, including tours, lectures, film festivals, and pedagogical development (see Katriel, 2016; Shah et al., 2007), its leaders decided to develop the *iNakba* app.

For Palestinians, the *Nakba* (“the catastrophe”) refers to the “uprooting of the Palestinians and the dismemberment and de-Arabization of historic Palestine” (Masalha, 2012, p. 1). The events of the *Nakba* occurred before, during, and after the 1948 war between Jewish armed forces, located in what was then the British Mandate over the colony of Palestine, and local Palestinian-Arab forces supported by the armies of neighboring Arab countries. As such, it is a politically charged term for events with far-reaching consequences that affect the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis to this day (Confino, 2012; Kimmerling, 2012; Morris, 2001; Pappé, 2007).

The 1948 war resulted in the uprooting of Palestinians from their native land and their dispersion as refugees, mainly in Arab countries such as Jordan and Lebanon. Those who stayed in what became Israel formed a distinct minority of 12.5% of the population at that time, which has since increased to more than 18% within a Jewish majority (Peled, 2014). The national conflict that has been fueled by the *Nakba*, and its aftermath remains unresolved.

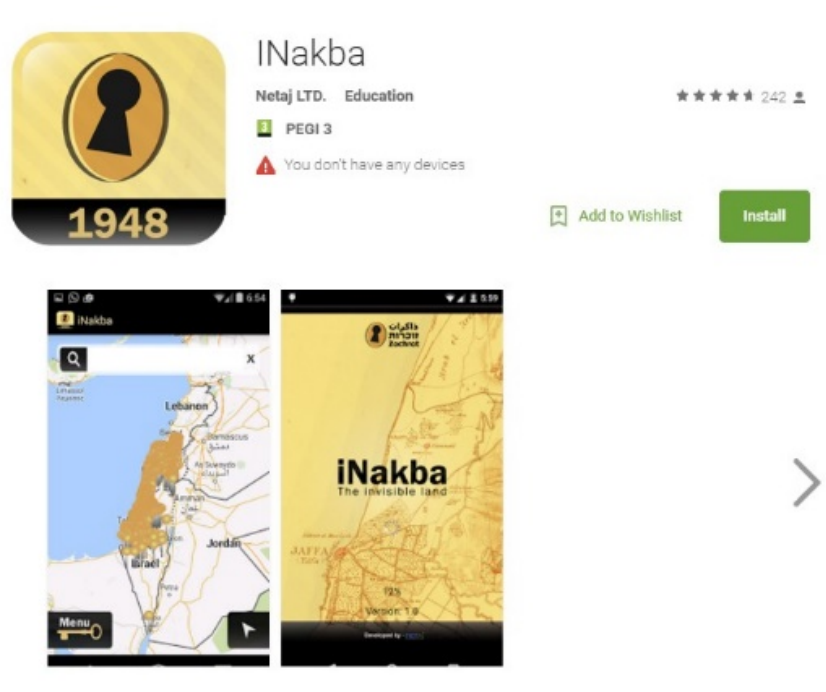
One major aspect of the *Nakba* was the destruction of Palestinian villages by Jewish forces—which were part of the emergent Israeli state—during the 1948 war, and later on as a deliberate Israeli policy that continued until the 1950s and 1960s (Kadman, 2008). This was followed by a transfer of ownership of about 250,000 acres of land from Palestinians to the Jewish State (Peled, 2014). In addition, the *Nakba* bifurcated Palestinian society into two distinct groups: refugees in various countries, including in the State of Israel, and those who stayed in their original homes (Peled, 2014; Sorek, 2015). The remaining population was severely hampered by the exile of many of their elites to neighboring Arab countries, which damaged cultural and knowledge-producing institutions (Sorek, 2015).

At the same time, however, the memory of the *Nakba* serves as a mobilizing force that promotes political activism and contributes to a coherent national Palestinian identity (Masalha, 2012; Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007). Indeed, numerous Palestinian political organizations have correlated Palestinians' private longing for the old village with the national Palestinian aspiration for a sovereign state and independence (Milshtein, 2009). Thus, the *Nakba* is both a symbol of loss and destruction and also a political tool used for disseminating Palestinian national consciousness.

The *Nakba*, as both a symbol and political tool, is constantly commemorated, and different fragments of Palestinian society have tried to mass mediate its memory in varied ways (Milshtein, 2009; Sorek, 2015). Among the fractured elements of Palestinian society, Palestinians living in Israel are unique memory actors in that they are able to commemorate the *Nakba* in physical proximity to where it actually happened—in what is today the State of Israel, where many Palestinians are not allowed to set foot. These unique mnemonic practices are demonstrated in ritualized familial pilgrimages to ruined villages, as well as in public efforts for restoration of destroyed mosques and churches (Sela & Kadish, 2016). In addition, as Israeli citizens, their commemoration efforts operate under complex and contested interactions with their counterparts. Indeed, the Palestinians living in Israel have created a unique form of memory that was always "a subject of surveillance by the authorities, and a sphere of dialogue with, and defiance of, Jewish Israeli citizens and the state" (Sorek, 2015, p. 3).

The Jewish Israeli fear of the *Nakba* has been translated into ongoing and systematic attempts to prevent its memory and commemoration (Ram, 2009). Official history books, for example, claim that the Palestinian *Nakba* was a mass "escape that took place either because of overblown fear fanned by Arab media, or in compliance with a call issued by the Arab leadership" (Ram, 2009, p. 372). Local maps ignore the Palestinian and Arab topography (Benvenisti, 1997). Last, the most prominent example of the attempt to "forget" the *Nakba*, was the destruction of villages and other remains that "might [have] served as mute monuments to the lives that had taken place in them" (Ram, 2009, p. 376), and the repopulation of Arab property with Jewish residents (Kadman, 2008; Ram, 2009; Sorek, 2015).

The notable recent attempt to memorialize the *Nakba* through a mobile app— *iNakba*—should be discussed as part of this ongoing struggle to commemorate the *Nakba* amid official efforts to forget it. The *iNakba* app offers content developed by historians, cartographers, and political activists to create a repository of knowledge about lost communities and locales (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the app functions as a social network to allow users to supplement its repositories with testimonials and images from survivors and their families.



**Figure 1. *iNakba* app ad on the Google Play store (January 12, 2018).**

Thus, the app takes on three political roles: (1) mnemonic tool—it transforms former Palestinian locales into “realms of memory,” drawing on Nora’s (1996) term<sup>3</sup>; (2) political knowledge—it forms a knowledge repository that is directed by and for professionals as well as grassroots activists; and (3) political participation—it acts as a social network that mobilizes and engages activists from Palestine and

<sup>3</sup> Nora (1996) defines *Lieux de Memoire* as “any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (p. xvii). As such, these are social sites that “contain” society’s memory and mediate it to the public, thus ratifying the dominant historical narrative as what is “ought to be remembered” and accepted. In a similar vein, *iNakba* offers the means to augment a community’s “memorial project” for mnemonic outreach and transmission of the collective’s heritage (see Tirosh, 2018).

beyond into a political community with a shared agenda,<sup>4</sup> through its use of user mobility. These roles clearly frame *iNakba* as a political app designed to advance an ideological agenda. This ideological agenda is promoted by inviting users to navigate between places that no longer exist, while commemorating them in the new media environment. As such, *iNakba* demonstrates the tension between place and its digital representations. To explore this relationship, we use Benjamin's conceptual framework about media, authenticity, and place.

### **Digital Representation and Authenticity of Place: Apps and Walter Benjamin**

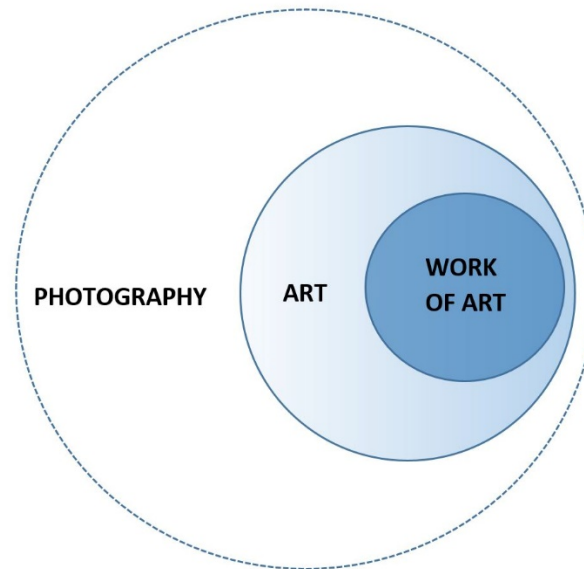
The relations between the authentic and its representations were given extensive consideration by Walter Benjamin. In a series of essays written in the 1930s, collectively entitled *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1936/2008), he discussed the capacity to recreate the authenticity present in works of art through reproduced artifacts. In these essays, he defines the "aura": "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" (Benjamin, 1936/2008, p. 285). Benjamin describes this distance as a gap between the original (or authentic) and the various modes of replication that approximate the original. Examining the reproduction of art via photography, he identifies a growing distance that affects and "weakens" the aura emanating from the authentic, further diminishing the viewer's experience.

Benjamin's critique of the mass-technological reproduction of art is thus linked to questions of distance between art and its representation (see Figure 2). He asserts that the proximity of a work of art to the original determines the mediation of meaning among viewers. However, photography, because of its reproductive nature, interposes distance from the authentic and inspiring original that is being imitated, and thereby diminishes its meaning.

Contemporary discussions of the aura have suggested that the experience of popular films, television programs, and, of late, virtual reality and new media forms may approximate the auratic experience (Bolter, MacIntyre, Gandy, & Schweitzer, 2006). For example, live-streaming feeds and online videos have been discussed in relation to holy places and digital pilgrimage (Golan & Martini, 2017, 2018). In these studies, the auratic concept was used to explain the experience of religious users who approximate religious places using digital means. Indeed, discussions of sacred spaces and the authenticity of place (Gurevitch & Aran, 1994; Smith, 1987) highlight their significance for constructing community. In particular, place signifies a locus of meanings for a given community (Smith, 1987, p. 28), and "authenticity" is valued as a genuine fundamental aspect of the self or a community (Uzelac, 2010). Through a narrative process of mythologization, a space is signified and constructed as "authentic." Once canonized, this "authentic" place is constantly affirmed and expanded through multiple representations, which in turn acquire social value as derivatives of the authentic.

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<sup>4</sup> While political participation is usually deemed as directed toward political change in terms of modifying the course of action of policy makers and the government (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012, p. 320), the *Nakba* movement resists the Israeli state. In conversations, *iNakba* entrepreneurs reported being strongly motivated by the desire to disseminate knowledge that could lead to political action, but did not specify the Israeli government as a viable administrator of their desired change.



**Figure 2. Figurative illustration of Walter Benjamin's discussion of the aura.**

Following Benjamin's line of thought, our exploration of *iNakba* in this study allows us to examine the meanings of the "authentic"—in this case, places and narratives—as it is mediated through representation in a geolocation-based app.

### Methodology

The *iNakba* app makes highly effective use of the unique functions and affordances of mobile apps (Tirosh, 2018). As such, it approximates an ideal type in Weberian terms, and thus serves as a suitable case for studying users' perceptions of the functionality of political apps.

To explore how political activists negotiate their use of apps to promote their agendas, between 2015 and 2017 we designed a multimethod research approach to obtain a holistic understanding of the *iNakba* app, its content, and the community to which it caters. As described in more detail below, the study included (a) interviews with Jewish and Palestinian activists who use the app, (b) informal conversations with both activists and appmasters,<sup>5</sup> (c) participant observations during political excursions led by Zochrot (in which the app is used), and (d) a semiotic review of the app itself and the official documents that accompanied its formative stages.

<sup>5</sup> The term *appmaster* refers to staff members employed in the production, management, and distribution of apps. This includes content managers, graphic designers, vetting agents, and others, comparable to webmasters (see Golan & Campbell, 2015).



### ***Interviews and Informal Conversations***

Twelve key discussions were conducted with appmasters, developers, and activists. A semistructured protocol was used to carry out 45-minute individual interviews (see Appendix). Ongoing contact enabled the development of a relationship with the Zochrot organization, through which key informants were identified. This contact provided a rich context in which to observe and interpret the actions and political expressions of activists, as well as their practices and viewpoints pertaining to the *iNakba* app. With the focus of the study being the agenda making of political activists, the majority of discussions were conducted with activists, while the additional activities described below supported and contextualized the findings.

### ***Participant Observation***

To illuminate the user-activist and developer experiences, the study included attendance at activist events organized by Zochrot, which catered to Palestinian and Jewish participants of various backgrounds (students, artists, journalists, older refugees, and others). In addition, we joined excursions to former Palestinian villages, organized by Zochrot activists, and reviewed documents such as pamphlets, Web pages, and instructional booklets that are produced and organized by the Zochrot enterprise. It should be noted that these excursions led to most of the interviews, through a snowballing procedure. Other contacts were made and maintained via Facebook discussions with Zochrot members.

### ***Semiotic Review***

In addition to the interviews and participant observation, the *iNakba* app itself was semiotically explored. To enhance our understanding of the app's content, we used it as a means of discovering Palestinian villages that do not appear on official Israeli maps. This was supplemented by an analysis of the technical specification document provided to us by Zochrot appmasters, and the app's description on the NGO's official website and on Google Play/AppStore.

Data gathered via this multimethod approach were identified and contextualized through systematic multiple readings of the research corpus that was analyzed as "texts" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002). The research corpus was captured and imported into a Dedoose mixed-method analysis project, and analyzed using a categorization technique (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) based on Marshall and Rossman's (2011) four stages: (a) organizing data; (b) generating categories, themes, and patterns; (c) testing any emergent hypothesis; and (d) searching for alternative explanations. The coding process was guided by principles for comparative analysis set forth by Glaser and Strauss (2009). To ensure reliability, three independent researchers analyzed the entire data set (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). The three sets of categories obtained from the separate analyses were compared and discussed (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Differences and disagreements were resolved through dialogue, leading to high interrater reliability among the independent researchers (Olesen, Droes, Hatton, Chico, & Schatzman, 1994).

### Findings

Exploring the *iNakba* app and the interpretations of its use, we uncovered how political activists view the app and how they negotiate the intellectual and expressive experiences it evokes. Accordingly, the study yielded three themes, as follows:

1. Place versus online space: users' accounts of their sense of offline place in a geopolitical locale, in contrast to their "visit" in an online-app space.
2. Interactivity: users' negotiations of the interactive nature of *iNakba* and the role played by user-generated content.
3. Reaching through the layers: users' experiences of (re)discovering what they regard as "authentic" landscapes and narratives by using an app designed for this purpose.

#### ***Place Versus Online Space***

While place and virtual space are often viewed as incompatible with one another, apps can create distinct relations between the two that ultimately shape users' ideological experiences. This is particularly reflected in the case at hand, as the geopolitical realities of physical space in Israel are contrasted with the information contained in the *iNakba* virtual space. Discussions with interviewees revealed various aspects of this tension.

Many interviewees described how they use *iNakba* while traveling and visiting places, and encounter tension between what they witness and what they are aware of while using the app. For example, *R*, an employee in the Zochrot organization, told us that a Palestinian friend of hers used *iNakba* while traveling with friends, and reported to her that when the app was activated, "It told us, 'You are in the village of . . . and this church was part of the village of . . .'" In *R*'s account, recreational excursions acquire an ideological component through using the app, as traveling around the country for various purposes is colored by the *Nakba*, and framed through the app: "Whenever [*Y*, a friend of *R*] travels, and each time she arrives at a certain place, even when she is using a bus, she uses the app. All through the bus journey you'll see what was on your left and what [was] on your right." Thus, we contend that for its users, *iNakba* may transform the very meaning of traveling.

In a similar vein, for *N*, a fellow activist and volunteer in the organization, the app is viewed as a trusted source of information that complements her travel experience when encountering unrecognized remains of structures. According to *N*, when she and her friends "spotted something at the edge of a hill" that looked like a ruin of an old house, she turned on the app "and used its location option." She explained that *iNakba* helped her find "two villages in the vicinity," thus solving the mystery of the unknown ruin. According to *N*, when "biking in Israeli forests" and encountering "a ruin,"

You may [now] know what happened there. You could look at a sign, and read the

deleted history that's being written there, because this is what the JNF [Jewish National Fund<sup>6</sup>] or any other [Israeli] organization is doing, [or] you could download *iNakba* and find in it different information.

The information offered to visitors by official Jewish and Israeli organizations is, according to *N*, a version that is biased in favor of the hegemonic culture, while the truth is found within the app's electronic pages.

Another user, *E*, explains how he has deeply integrated the app into his everyday routine, and also stresses its impact on his travel experience. He explains,

Any place I would travel to, I would activate the app, see what's around, follow the app and reach a village. This way, I reached villages that I was not familiar with. I would find remnants of a village that I would record and upload to the app and perhaps post something on Facebook.

For *E*, each trip is transformed into a journey of learning and discovery of the local landscape: finding out about regions he is visiting, uncovering ruins and relics, deciphering their unknown meaning, and sharing it on the app and on Facebook.

Although these examples reveal how several interviewees experienced the *iNakba* capabilities while on the move, *G*, a student engaged in Palestinian politics, experienced *iNakba*'s transformative capabilities while at home. He stated, "Everyone who downloads the app should start off by searching around his place of residence, or places that he frequents." By doing so, you may "suddenly discover that it lies on top of or near places where people used to live, but don't reside there anymore. This makes it interesting, and also emotional." According to *G*, this is "THE most meaningful impact of the app, and its goal." As such, the app defamiliarizes its users from their intimate homes. The new information challenges the user's self-awareness and prompts reflection and critical self-understanding.

### ***Interactivity***

*Interactivity* is the "users' capability to design for themselves their own media environments, including the identity of those they converse with, and the ability to contribute their own content to these environments" (Schejter & Tirosh, 2016, p. 16). For *iNakba* users, while most of the framework is preordained by Zochrot appmasters and appointed experts (e.g., historians and geographers), much room is provided for user-generated content. The app's pages invite users to add historic photographs, personal accounts, and more, thus fostering user participation and cultivating activists, while also providing broader

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<sup>6</sup> The Jewish National Fund (JNF) is a key Zionist foundation. Established in 1901, its original purpose was raising funds for the purchase of lands in Palestine, and it later subsidized settlers and settlements (Kimmerling, 2012, pp. 278–279). Since these prestate endeavors, the JNF has gained ownership over much of the country's land and has been active in naming forests and other places with Hebrew names as part of an effort to connect Jewish visitors "to their heritage" (as explained by the JNF website), and affirm Israeli hegemony over the land.

access to information (e.g., testimonials and images) from grassroots sources.

Our interviews revealed that for some users, interactivity is perceived as a value in itself. As explained by *N*, one of the most important attributes of *iNakba* is “the interactivity of the thing.” According to *N*, *iNakba*’s interactivity lies in “the fact that we are not the only ones who add information to it, and we are not the only ones who flesh out knowledge of everything, but we also get information from users.” In a similar vein, *E* claimed, “This notion of sharing is the most crucial thing. It turns [the app] into something of great potential.”

Whereas interactivity is a crucial functionality of the app for some, others have indicated what might be defined as the inherent limitation of interactivity—the fact that it is dependent on user willingness to participate, to share content, and to actively contribute to the process of constructing the app. *G*, for example, claimed that even though he was aware of the interactive possibilities in the app, he had not tried using them. “In short, it didn’t grab me.” *D*, in another example, added that she refrained from contributing content to the app as she was not sure “whether I can actually do so.” Later in the conversation, *D* claimed that she “didn’t consider this option” and that she was not sure that she would “take on this task.” She thus expressed her refusal to accept responsibility for sharing information that may be of value to the collective.

Some interviewees claimed that through interactivity, *iNakba* democratizes the process of knowledge production regarding the *Nakba* and what actually happened during and after the 1948 war. This democratization process, according to *iNakba* users, may contribute to the creation of a highly accurate source of information regarding the *Nakba* and its aftermath. *N*, for example, described how the app is being used “to contact people who know the village.” According to her, this moment of contact “is an opportunity to gain information from them and to engage them with us [the Zochrot organization].” For her, the interactive capabilities of *iNakba* are an opportunity “to expand the circle of people creating knowledge about a place.”

As noted, this knowledge production is not only about accumulating available knowledge. It is also about the creation of a counternarrative, a more precise account of the events of 1948. According to *R*, the main appmaster, the *iNakba* will become the “the most precise Palestinian map in the world, out of all the maps in the world.” *R* expressed her amazement that “ever since we inaugurated this [app], I have been receiving messages from refugees telling me that ‘our village is not exactly where [it should be], [we] will send you more precise coordinates so you can add it.’”

*R* states that “over time, and with the refugees’ support, you can be more and more accurate.” Thus, she emphasizes the continuous effort of accumulating data from users in an ongoing effort to attain a complete and accurate historical account. While creating a sense of veracity, and thus confronting what *R* sees as the false narrative disseminated by the state and other organizations, the interactive aspects of *iNakba* are also a way to revive memories of the lost, destroyed, and suppressed Palestinian villages. For *R*, the current appmaster, a “place can be revived” by the fact that refugees can “follow” a certain village in the app, and by doing so can receive new information about it. Similarly, for *E*, a former Zochrot employee, the app, with its inherent interactivity, can “keep the place alive . . . to make it something

much more vivid." Later, *E* went on to claim that the app has the potential to enable the 12 million Palestinian refugees around the world to "virtually connect, but almost in a very true way, to their place." The villages, he claimed, "continue to live."

### ***Reaching Through the Layers***

The *iNakba* app offers a large amount of information about formerly populated Palestinian places that were destroyed before, during, and after the 1948 war (Khalidi, 2017, p. 10). This information is framed through two main layers: a present-day map of Israel, showing current Jewish and Palestinian locales, and a second layer showing places that are usually undetected but that exist in Zochrot maps and in historic scholarship. Conversations with users revealed their experiences of reaching through these layers and uncovering the past by using the app.

The app's users discussed how it offers an experience that combines the physical act of visiting a place, the collective act of making these visits, and the intellectual pleasure of learning information and attaching ideological meaning to places. These interconnected aspects jointly provide a sense of recreating a lost collective memory and reanimating the past.

Thus, the experience achieved by this layered structure is given ideological meaning. An appmaster related the uncovering of unfamiliar layers underneath well-established Jewish settlements and places that may appear to be "apolitical." She elaborates:

You type "Herzliya" and then you face villages that are underneath Herzliya, as there is more than one village underneath it, so this is another feature we want to develop. I was thinking also . . . about mapping the JNF forests and nature [spaces], [as] there are many villages underneath the recreational parks; and I want to add another layer . . . of the refugee camps . . . in Lebanon . . . Syria and Jordan.

Another affective result of the uncovering of layers was described by a user of the app: "If it is a place that was located near a place you live in, [you] study [them] and suddenly you realize that [the places you know] are near the once-populated land, and now no one is there; it turns into something interesting and emotional." Similarly, another user wanted to know whether her own home is located on a former Palestinian village. "I want to know if I'm sitting on [the village's] land, or not. I would be happy if it appeared on the map, if they would show that to me." Thus, through engagement with the app, users felt they could refamiliarize themselves with the places in which they live and work by being exposed to a newly unveiled history that holds deep meaning for their identity.

Another user lamented that the app can only indicate the former borders of the lost places, but not their internal design, and as a result "users could sense that it was a real place, a physical space," but without details. Through a future improved version of the app, she hopes to be able to deepen her understanding of the past. She thus expresses a connection between the information provided by the app, the revelation of forgotten and suppressed knowledge, and the political experience of users; she also implies her trust in technology as a mnemonic tool for society.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Discussions about new media and apps have depicted how political agents use the properties of new media to advance their goals. The study of political apps such as *iNakba* offers an internal view of the management of ideological goals by technological means (Schejter & Tirosh, 2016). A sociopolitical examination of political apps would focus on a number of questions that emerge from the case study at hand, such as, What is the political potential of mobile apps? How do they alter political discussions in society? Do they allow different actors to participate in political discourse? Can they alter the power structures that dictate political debates? Who are the new information vetters in the app environment? Addressing these questions could shed light on power relations in the contemporary app era. This study, however, adopts a phenomenological perspective, looking instead at how users negotiate their app use in this new environment. In this way, we seek to understand how individual users operate and construct their political networks and enhance their ideological commitment in the app era.

Applying this phenomenological approach, three major themes were identified. In the first theme, place versus online space, we found that a tension exists between the activists' experience of visiting a real place and their experience of the parallel online mediated reality. Further exploring this theme, we discovered that the activists use *iNakba* both while on the move and while they are stationary within their own personal and private spheres. In both instances, the app transforms the meaning of these places and leads to a more complex perception of reality.

In the second theme, interactivity, we described how *iNakba's* appmasters and users negotiate the app's interactive functionality. Indeed, while on some online social networks (e.g., Facebook or YouTube) users tend to nurture their individualized habitus (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), in the case of *iNakba*, the political app mediates between an individual and a political community. This mediation is experienced as a joint effort that democratizes the cocreation of knowledge about the *Nakba* and its aftermath. Although several users expressed their apprehension about the weight of responsibility and effort involved in this undertaking, most emphasized the importance of its communal-interactive impact and its role in reanimating a shared, suppressed history and lost places. By creating and facilitating participation in a shared mission, the app allows political activists to continuously feed the political movement's sense of common purpose.

Ultimately, in the third and last theme, reaching through the layers, we uncovered how the activists within the *iNakba* community assign meaning to their app use through working with the layers of meaning that it provides. This unique form of political work enables activists to express and realize their yearning to imagine, learn about, and recreate lost spaces. Using the app, we observed that the closer these activists get to this geolocale, the stronger their experience, and the more fulfilling is their simulation of past/present and desired/corporeal. This corresponds with studies into the use of apps with augmented reality features (Liao & Humphreys, 2015). Research has found that users of these apps tend to "raise questions regarding who has authority over space and to reconstruct political and historical meaning in place" (Liao & Humphreys, 2015, p. 1420). Indeed, our findings strengthen the conclusion that "mobile technologies raise new opportunities for the creation of place, allowing people to reencounter

everyday space and understand the structure of those settings" (Liao & Humphreys, 2015, p. 1420). We propose that Walter Benjamin's ideas may illuminate the process via which this "creation of place" occurs.

To further explain these themes, we suggest a return to the concept of the aura, as developed by Walter Benjamin (1936/2008). As described earlier, Benjamin discusses the idea of authentic centers whose impact is transmitted through their aura, which is diminished by "mechanical reproduction." Arguably, the off-line places of interest in the *iNakba* case (destroyed villages and renamed locales) inhabit a highly powerful and original 'auratic mode of existence.' They inspire a sense of awe in their proximity to a lost reality, and can be viewed as a pinnacle of aura and utmost authenticity. Exploring the impact of the *iNakba* app, we observe that its geolocation capabilities enable users to negotiate their distance from an imagined authentic reality, and then also allow them to experience a shortening of that distance. It appears that the app invites "charismatic moments" for users as they "surprisingly" uncover an unknown truth about a place. This sense of revelation and often spontaneous learning while traveling around the country, interacting with the app while exploring the different layers of meaning it offers, enhances the very sense of authenticity that—according to Benjamin—should have been weakened. In other words, new location-based political apps may have the potential to preserve or restore a sense of authenticity in mediated situations.

This, however, is not to say that Benjamin's assertion regarding the weakening of the aura is necessarily mistaken. The shadow of time, and political efforts to reframe the landscape, have certainly had an impact on visitors' ability to (re)connect to the "authentic" past. The distance that now exists between the authentic historical place and its mediated representation leaves room for the creation of a new community of knowledge. The work of the *iNakba* appivists both affirms their elevated status within the activist community and enhances Zochrot's repertoire of political offerings, as the appmasters now control a significant repository of data comprising contributions from both experts and a live community of users. In turn, this allows the appmasters to vet the shared knowledge and control its distribution, affirming their position as knowledge bearers of a "sanctified" past, and thereby reorganizing the social structures that have arisen around the ideologically laden sites and their representations. The knowledge-bearing domain includes not only the places themselves, but also an array of digital actors, stakeholders, experts, witnesses, and laypeople (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3. App's (re)structuring of knowledge bearers' social standing as it relates to the authentic past.**

This analysis, we contend, enriches our understanding of political apps. It illuminates the involvement of political agents in the design and use of these goal-driven technologies, and shows how apps serve as platforms for these agents to frame information, construct user knowledge, participate in the creation of a political-knowledge archive, and promote social action and off-line activities, thus aligning the affordances of contemporary media with their own agendas. While past scholarship has raised concerns about the low level of political participation observed among Web 2.0 users (also referred to as "slacktivism"; see Rotman et al., 2011), the use of political apps, certainly in the case of *iNakba*, suggests a more active role of both creators and users. Thus, in addition to the affordances of Web 2.0 for political action (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), a location-based user experience offers another layer of meaning for activists, adding an augmented sense of place to the digital experience. Furthermore, while augmented reality is not a necessary feature of political apps, our application of Benjamin's ideas demonstrate how its overt (or covert) inclusion in app design can offer a rich toolkit for conveying political meanings to digitally inclined publics.

Indeed, political apps offer a uniquely mobile online experience that is not tethered to a specific location. They can thus connect individuals' online experiences with their off-line experiences, and offer them opportunities not only to browse information and create content but also to take these tools with them as they search for the authentic.



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### **Appendix: Interview Protocol for App Users/Activist**

#### **Background of the App User**

- Where are you from?
- What is your background?
- Age? Gender?
- Level of education (did not finish high school vs. high school diploma vs. bachelor's degree vs. graduate degree)
- What is your position in the *iNakba* enterprise?

- What is your general education? Do you have a background in computers? How did you get connected to new media (and at what age)?
- How often do you use mobile apps in general?
- Which mobile apps do you use frequently?

***Background of Your Experience With the iNakba App***

- When was your first introduction/encounter with the app, and how?
- Did you download the app to your device? Onto how many devices?
- How often do you use the app?
- For what purpose?
- How active are you in contributing content to the app?
- Do your friends use the app? Do you recommend it to your friends?
- Do you share the app with friends over social media (Facebook, WhatsApp)?
- What updates/modifications (functionalities) would you add to the app?

***Motivation and Mission***

- What is the mission of the app in your opinion? (e.g., political, spiritual, informational)
- What are your motivations to use the app?
- In what instances have you used the app OR in what instances would you (or have you heard) use the app? (e.g., recreational, ideological excursions)

***Affiliation and Identification***

- With which groups/communities do you feel affiliated?
- What group/community do you feel that the app represents/reflects?
- Who, in fact, does it cater to?
- Who do you think is backing the app? What are their goals and motivations?
- What message do you think the app presents about your community (or that of the Palestinians) and its way of life?

***Sources of Influence***

- What other websites/apps, if any, are available to your community?

***Structural Components: Mobility***

- What does iNakba's GPS navigation add to your app experience?
- Do you see the iNakba app as a more enriching user experience than traditional media (e.g., maps, books)? In what way?