IJoC | Arab Revolutions: Breaking Fear

The Arab Spring and Online Protests in Iraq

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This article traces the influence of the Arab Spring on Iraq as activists staged fervent protests against the corruption, sectarianism, and favoritism of Nouri Maliki's government. A group of young Iraqi intellectuals, journalists, students, government employees, and unemployed youth posted their plan to organize demonstrations against the government using social media in February 2011. This study investigates the use of Facebook and YouTube, which bypassed the government's attempt to limit the coverage of these protests. Indeed, the events during the Arab Spring in Iraq crossed sectarian lines and united Iraqis against the Shiite-dominated government. I examine the five most popular Facebook pages and more than 806 YouTube clips and their 2,839 comments related to the Iraqi Arab Spring. The study reveals that young Iraqi men between the ages of 25 and 30 were the most active bloggers, while those between the ages of 20 and 24 were the most active commentators during the protests. Iraqis living in the United States and Canada played an important role by posting YouTube clips and comments. A gender disparity was evident; Iraqi men posted more video clips and comments than women.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Arab media, social media, Iraqi Arab Spring, YouTube, Facebook, Arab blogosphere, Internet use, social activism, Arab protests

Introduction

The Arab Spring was not the result of a sudden event. Before it began in late 2010, protests had been staged in some Arab countries that paved the way to this major event, especially the Revolt of the Gafsa in Tunisia and the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt. When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, a wave of protests swept Tunisia and triggered the start of the Arab Spring. The fleeing of the former president of Tunisia, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, to Saudi Arabia created hope for real

change that comes from peaceful protests rather than political assassinations or coups, as had been the case with many previous revolutions in the Arab world. Most other Arab countries followed the example of Tunisia, where the youth felt frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities and disappointed with the corrupt political systems and lack of social and political equality and freedom. In Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, they decided to publicly display their disagreements with their governments.

During the Arab Spring events, many Iraqis started to voice their dissatisfaction with the government, and this process culminated in dozens of protests that began on February 12, 2011. On this day, hundreds of Iraqis from all sects gathered around Tahrir Square and chanted: "No, no to corruption," "The government's officials are thieves," and "Baghdad, Baghdad, spark a revolution" (Sly, 2011). In Mosul, an unemployed 31-year-old Iraqi man who had four children set himself on fire near Tahrir Square as a protest against the government (Agence France-Presse, 2011). During the Day of Rage on February 25, 2011, which was the largest event organized (see Figures 1 and 2). Nouri Maliki prohibited live media coverage and prevented journalists from covering the event in an attempt to downplay the importance of these protests. This led to cries of protest from Iraqis: "Liar, Liar, Nouri Maliki; Bring electricity!"; "No to corruption!"; "Oil for the people not for the thieves"; "Where has the people's money gone?"; "Yes for democracy and the protection of freedom" (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2011; Sly 2011). During the course of this day, about 30 people were killed by the Iraqi police, and many others were injured. In response to the protests, Maliki attempted to discredit the protestors' cause and accused them of being anarchists and enemies of the state because they were followers of Saddam Hussein's outlawed Baath Party and Al-Qaeda affiliates (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2011). Maliki's media restrictions correspond with the media systems in other Arab countries under authoritarian rule (Al-Rawi, 2012). For example, during the protests in Libya in February 2011, Gadhafi ordered a news blackout to control the situation (Black & Bowcott, 2011), and Ali Abdullah Saleh's government in Yemen, in an apparent attempt to discourage journalists from doing their work, ignored attacks against and harassment of journalists trying to cover the protests in 2011 (Kasinof, 2011, p. A10).

Despite pressure and threats from government officials, thousands of Iraqis from all over the country protested against the state, and many of them used YouTube and Facebook as alternative media channels to report the events and voice their views. This situation was similar to that in Iran after the 2009 election, when Iranians protested in the streets and used Twitter to spread the word about their revolution and reveal the malpractices of Ahmadinejad's government (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011).

Figure 1. The Revolution of Rage (February, 25, 2011) announcement that was posted on several Iraqi Facebook pages contained the protesters' grievances against Maliki's government.

***Figure 2. The Revolution of Rage (February 25, 2011) announcement that was posted on
several Facebook pages. It states: "Iraqis, rise up and raise your voice! No to unemployment!
Yes to equal opportunities to get jobs! For the sake of leading a gracious life."***

Most Western media attention was directed toward Tunisia and Egypt and later Syria, but Iraq's
Arab Spring was somehow underreported. One of the main reasons for this lack of attention was the
ongoing violence in the country that overshadows revolutionary calls for social and political change. The
former prime minister of Iraq, Ayad Allawi, rightly wondered in March 2012:

> To be honest, people speak about Arab Spring. . . . What spring is this? Spring is
> associated with green, renewal of life. We are having blood pouring everywhere in the
> region and destruction and dismemberment of countries, and chaos is happening.
> (Birnbaum, 2012, para. 5–6)

In short, the Arab Spring in Iraq became part of the popular culture. Hundreds of caricatures making fun of Maliki and Talabani filled Iraqi blogs and forums. Al-Sharqiya channel, for example, produced a TV series in 2012 entitled *Bab Al-Sharqi: The Iraqi Revolution 2011* with 17 episodes aired during the 2011 holy month of Ramadan.

Yet the situation in Iraq remains different from some other Arab countries. While Mubarak's government made a radical move in Egypt in shutting down Internet access for few days to prevent activists from spreading information and organizing the protests, Bahrain and Syria closely monitored what was said on Facebook and Twitter to silence dissidents (Reporters Without Borders, 2013). In fact, Reporters Without Borders labeled Bahrain, Syria, and Iran as "enemies of the Internet" because of their massive online surveillance activity.

Theoretical Framework

Social networking sites (SNSs) became the most popular websites worldwide as of October 2011. Of every five minutes spent on the Internet, about one minute is spent on social media. In regions as diverse as the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, and Africa, SNSs constituted about 24% of all the time spent on the Internet, a 35% increase from 2010 (comScore, 2011b). YouTube has become the most popular video platform online; the site delivers two out of every five videos viewed around the world. "In October 2011, there were about 1.2 billion people age 15 and older [who] watched 201.4 billion videos online globally" (comScore, 2011a).

The Internet has been an effective platform for social and political activism (Chadwick & Howard, 2009), and SNSs in particular have attracted more people worldwide to join in public debates on various issues. The "networked public sphere" coined by Yochai Benkler (2006) seems to fit well the Arab Spring context as citizens exchange views and work as watchdogs to monitor the political powers. Segerberg and Bennet (2011) argue that the role of social media channels has grown so fast that they have entered the phase of protest action and have become part of the tools of social and political activism. One of the reasons for the popularity of social media channels stems from ordinary citizens' frustration with "social control and manipulation by powerful political, corporate and media forces" (Keren, 2006, p. 149). Many groups are excluded from mainstream media channels, so they naturally resort to SNSs to freely express their views and organize their movements (Bennett, 2003; Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Indeed, these channels constitute the very fabric of the public sphere by enhancing deliberative democracy and social contention, though the bonds that link protestors and activists do not last long (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 77; Calhoun, 2004; Castells 2001; Dahlberg, 2007).

In the Arab world, people use social networking sites to disseminate the idea of revolution, spread information on when and where to demonstrate, unify public opinion, and enhance the public sphere by offering a virtual platform for the exchange of ideas. The revolts in Tunisia and Egypt in 2008 and the Arab Spring that followed certainly led to a rapid increase of Facebook users. For example, Egypt witnessed a "dramatic growth of nearly 1.35 million new Facebook users . . . from 4.3 million on November 15, 2010 to 5.65 million as of March 1, 2011" (ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 2010, p. 21).

Despotic Arab governments—some of which, as in Bahrain, are still in power—seem to be more concerned with the impact of SNS on their populations than on the effect of traditional media outlets. Nik Gowing (2011) from the BBC confirms, "Facebook, YouTube, Twitter or Flickr is far more troubling to institutions of power than what are now the narrow, ageing tram-line assumptions of a so-called CNN effect" (p. 16). A late 2011 survey conducted in six Arab countries and in Iran in connection to street protests found that social media outlets were viewed as "helpful tools" rather than event initiators or instigators. More than 6 out of 10 respondents believed that social media were a "positive force in spreading information about the recent developments in the Arab World to the international community" (Zogby, 2011, p. 21). The study concluded that

> 37% of Arab respondents believe that the recent uprisings in the Arab World could not have occurred without the role played by social media sites, 53% think that social media sites accelerated a process that was already underway, and just 10% feel that social media sites had very little or no impact on the uprisings. (Zogby, 2011, p. 16)

Karim H. Karim (2003) notes that many communities in the diaspora remain connected to their original countries via the Internet, TV, and radio, and media consumption and production becomes part of their identities. Karim relates this phenomenon to the immigrants' need to link themselves to their home countries:

> Members of diasporic groups in the West are among the most active in producing electronic cultural resources. There appears to be an attempt by diasporic participants in cyberspace to create a virtual community that eliminates the distances that separate them in the real world. . . . Time and space are seemingly held in suspension in this effort to reconstitute the community and to exchange cultural knowledge held in the diaspora. (Karim, 2007, p. 273)

Many Iraqis who fled the country after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion were active in producing and disseminating news and information on the protests during the Arab Spring in Iraq.

Internet Use in Iraq

After 2003, Iraq's economic situation improved, and Iraqis enjoyed relative freedom and greater access to the Internet. Many Iraqis, both inside and outside the country, ran their own websites and blogs that had either political or religious affiliations, and a few were independent and secular in nature. The fate of many of these websites seems directly linked to the availability of funding. Iraqi insurgents were among the first active Internet users because they needed to spread propaganda on their activities and gather popular support and possible funding. Several pan-Arab TV channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya made use of the videos and announcements posted online by Iraqi insurgent groups to cover the events in Iraq (Al-Marashi, 2004, 2006; International Crisis Group, 2006).

In fact, with an estimated 860,400 users, the 2.8% penetration rate of Internet users in Iraq is the lowest in the Middle East region (Internet World Stat, 2011). The International Telecommunication

Union (2012) estimates the Internet penetration in Iraq at 2.5% (p. 51). When the U.S. Department of State asked a Silicon Valley delegation and some executives from Twitter WordPress, YouTube, Google, and AT&T to visit Iraq in 2009 to determine how they could help build a better Internet infrastructure in the country, the visitors were surprised to find that only about 5% of Iraqi homes had Internet access. The major challenge lies in the electricity supply, which is dwindling despite billions of dollars invested in this sector (Reagan, 2009). Interestingly, these figures resemble the situation in 2000 in Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan, where few people had Internet access—less than 1%, 3%, and 3%, respectively (Zogby, 2011, p. 1).

Facebook remains an important venue for Arabs to remain connected in the virtual world. A study conducted by the Dubai School of Government (2011) estimates that the "total number of Facebook users in the Arab world stands at 21,361,863 (Dec. 2010), up from 11,978,300 (Jan. 2010)" (p. 4). With around 4.7 million users, Egypt comprises about 22% of the total number of users in the Arab world. People between the ages of 15 and 29 constitute about 75% of users. On average, for every two male Facebook users there is one female user (Dubai School of Government, 2011).

The most popular website among Iraqis is Facebook, and YouTube is ranked second as of April 2013 (Alexa, 2013).[2] Iraqis use Facebook to stay connected with friends and relatives who have fled the violence in the country. When the Arabic Facebook started in March 2009, about 400 Iraqis joined in the first two months (Inside Facebook, cited in Brooks & al-Haidari, 2011). According to Socialbakers (2011), Iraq ranks 71st in the world in terms of Facebook penetration, with a 4.39% penetration rate among the population. "The total number of FB users in Iraq is reaching 1,303,500 and grew by more than 443,100" in a few months. The "largest age group is currently 18–24 with total of 521,400 users, followed by the users in the age of 25–34" (Socialbakers, 2011).[3] The popularity of social networking increased rapidly after the Iraqi general election in March 2010. In August 2010, the number of Facebook users was estimated to be 270,560 (Brooks & al-Haidari 2011). As of April 2013, Iraq climbed to 50th place in terms of Facebook penetration in the world with 3,265,880 monthly active users and 11.01% penetration (Socialbakers, 2013).

Although the figures fluctuate, the Facebook pages most visited by Iraqis as of May 1, 2012, were "Baghdad" with 137,083 followers, "The Largest Iraqi Gathering on Facebook" with 138,002 followers, "Al-Shabab TV" with 85,093 followers, "Iraqis on Facebook" with 74,113 followers, "The Empire of Iraqi Jokes/Bluffing" with 71,364 followers, "Iraq" with 61,606 followers, "IrAq We LoVe YoU" with 35,664 followers, and "Iraq You Tube" with 20,963 followers. Almost all of these Facebook pages contain a clear nationalist—and, to a certain extent, chauvinist—sentiment that transcends the differences among Iraqis. "The Largest Iraqi Gathering on Facebook," for example, announces that it is for all Iraqis. The site

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[2] The top 10 most viewed websites in Iraq are as follows: (1) Facebook, (2) YouTube, (3) Google.iq, (4) Google, (5) Yahoo!, (6) XNXX Galleries, (7) 302 Found, (8) Amazon, (9) Blogspot, and (10) Kooora (sport) (Alexa, 2013).

[3] Facebook use by age group is as follows: ages 18–24, 40%; 25–34, 32%; 35–44, 11%; 16–17, 7%; 13–15, 5%; 45–54; 4%; 55–64; 1%; and 65–100, 1%. There is a significant gender gap among users; 73% of Facebook users are male and 27% are female (Socialbakers, 2011).

contains a direct reference to the animosity against Iran, whose soldiers are described as "dogs," whereas Iraqi soldiers are referred to as "lions"—an indirect reference to the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). From January to May 2012, there was a rapid increase in the number of followers of the aforementioned Facebook pages.[4] Iraqis are becoming more active online, regardless of whether they are residing inside or outside the country. It is important to note that most of these followers of the aforementioned Facebook pages are Iraqis, as indicated by use of the Iraqi Arabic dialect and its unique terms and expressions that are difficult to understand by Arabs from other countries.

Unlike other governmental and private websites, Iraqi blogs are highly connected to one another, which signifies a "tight community, as well as Web-literacy that is not evident elsewhere on the Iraqi Web" (Digital Methods Initiative, 2007, para. 5). The most active blogs are written in English by Iraqi expatriates living in North America and Europe, and they are sometimes classified within the "English Bridge" category of Arab bloggers (Etling, Kelly, Faris, & Palfrey, 2010, p. 1234). As of 2009, about one in eight bloggers wrote in Arabic, and almost 70% of the blogs written were in English (Chua, 2011; Whitaker & Varghese, 2009). From the beginning of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Salam Pax's "Where Is Raed" became one of the most famous blogs written in English by an Iraqi who narrated his experience living in Iraq before, during, and after the invasion (Denning, 2008, pp. 4–5; Williams, 2011, p. 12).[5] Other Iraqi English blogs became famous, such as "Baghdad Burning" and "Iraq the Model." Among the popular blogs is "Wahda," which was funded by IREX to encourage Iraqis to write about their daily experiences.[6] The site receives about 18,000 visitors per month (Chua, 2011). The popular Iraqi blog "Shalash the Iraqi" is very critical of the government, and about 209,634 people have visited the blog. More than 5,934 Iraqi blogs are on Maktoub; most readers follow a blog called "Iraq" that is affiliated with Ayatollah Mohammed Ridha Al-Shirazi and has had more than 1,677,317 visitors.

Iraqis are more interested in the online discussion of issues such as Israel (Arab Thought Foundation, 2010, p. 34), while sectarianism is the most discussed topic on Arabic blogs among all the other Arab countries examined (Arab Thought Foundation, 2010, p. 41). Other popular blogs include "Kulshi wa Kalashi," which has received 72,506 unique visitors since it was established. Interestingly, the blog is involved in the recent protests against the Iraqi and Syrian governments. Forums operating from Iraq are also popular, especially "Shakwmakw: Not Just a Word," which has 111,315 registered members with more than 336,337 topics discussed. The Shabab Al-Iraq (Iraqi Youth) forum has 79,791 registered members and 208,569 topics under discussion.

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[4] In January 2012, "Baghdad" had 108,062 followers; "The Largest Iraqi Gathering on Facebook" had 84,118 followers; "Al-Shabab TV" had 59,251 followers; "Iraq" had 46,538 followers, "The Empire of Iraqi Jokes/Bluffing" had 40,537 followers; "Iraqis on Facebook" had 22,225 followers; "IrAq We LoVe YoU" had 19,753" followers; and "Iraq You Tube" had 18,567 followers.

[5] Although it has not been updated in a long time, the following link provides a list of Iraqi blogs in Arabic and English: http://www.iraqblogcount.blogspot.com. The updated version can be accessed at http://iraqblogcountexp.blogspot.com. Other blogs, such as http://starfromiraq.blogspot.com and http://iraqiblogs.blogspot.com, provide updated links to other Iraqi blogs.

[6] Most of the blogs were last checked on May 1, 2012.

After the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad sensed the growing importance of Iraqi websites in disseminating ideas and in understanding the situation in the country, so it started monitoring them in a systematic way in August 2005 and continued to do so until the end of that year (WikiLeaks, 2005). The most monitored websites include: Iraq4allnews, Kitabat, Al-Rafidayn, Iraqi Press, Soat al-Iraq (The Voice of Iraq), Elaph,[7] Al-Dar al-Iraqia, Wattan 4 All, Dar al-Iraqiya, Al-Anbar, An-Nahrain, Iraqi Home, Al-Bayan, Al-Jeeran, Makany, and the Independent Iraqi News Agency. The first two were viewed and assessed by the U.S. Embassy more than the others.

In brief, the facts and figures cited above indicate the increasing popularity of Facebook, blogs, and other social networking sites in a country that is witnessing much discontent with the government's performance. The next sections describe a survey of the most popular Facebook pages and contain an analysis of YouTube clips and comments in relation to the Iraqi Arab Spring.

Facebook Use and Political Activism in Iraq

Despite the fact that Facebook is the most popular website in Iraq, its users are still relatively few. Many Iraqi politicians neglected Facebook's impact, and even Nouri Maliki allegedly regarded it once as a "dustbin" (Brooks & al-Haidari, 2011).[8]

Among the first to recognize the importance of Facebook was the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, which established a Facebook page on January 21, 2010, and looked for "Iraqi sympathizers." The page contains information on the embassy and offers practical knowledge such as an "English Language Corner," where Iraqis can learn English and read about fellowship opportunities (Carter, 2010). The embassy's Facebook page had 21,466 followers as of May 1, 2012.

Unlike the popularity of the Egyptian Facebook page "We Are All Khaled Said," which secured 2 million followers during the Arab Spring, Iraqi Facebook pages received much less attention. A survey of the most popular Facebook pages during the Arab Spring in Iraq revealed that most pages were established in early February 2011 and carried an obvious secular orientation. The emphasis was on uniting Shiites and Sunnis to face Maliki's government, although some slight religious connotations accompanied the visual materials. Many Facebook pages include edited and insulting photos of Maliki and Talabani to demean or make fun of them. Some of the accompanying photos posted on Facebook pages included men and women protesting and carrying sarcastic banners in Arabic, such as: "We don't ask for skyscrapers . . . We want you to fix the sewage," or Congratulations! Prize for World Class Corruption." The emphasis of most banners was on improving public services and security. Other photos and drawings that were edited contained messages such as "The Volcano of Rage," "The Rage Revolution Against the Sectarian Politicians," "No to Maliki, no to corruption, no to poverty," "No negotiation, no surrender . . . a

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[7] This is a website run from London by a Saudi man named Othman Al-'Amir, who used to work for the Saudi-owned Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper. The news website, which was founded on May 21, 2001, claims to be the first website to offer Arabic daily news.

[8] The same applies to Twitter; only three Iraqi politicians regularly used Twitter before 2010, but this number increased during the general elections in 2010 (Centre UNESCO de Catalunya, 2010, p. 84).

revolution to topple the regime," "Iraq's Unity Friday," "Baghdad Won't Be Kandahar," and "Shout in the face of corruption . . . Iraqis deserve a better life."

Many Facebook pages had a companion YouTube channel and Twitter account created to be part of the efforts to inform the Iraqi public on the protests. The most popular Facebook page was "Support the Iraqi Youth Revolution"; it had more than 130,350 followers and was established on February 9, 2011 (http://www.facebook.com/Supportiraq). Its profile stated: "The Iraqi Revolution is a revolution to support the right in the face of injustice, corruption, and tyranny. . . . The aim of the Iraqi Revolution is to eradicate Iraq from the corrupt people, occupation and its agents." Other important Facebook pages include "The Grand Iraqi Revolution" (http://www.facebook.com/Iraqe.Revolution), which was established on February 1, 2011, and carries the slogan "Sunni, Christian, Shiite, Sabean, Yazidi . . . all of this is not an identity. . . . What is important is my blood is Iraqi" (see Figures 3 and 4). The page profile mentions that Iraq is part of the Arab world, and the movement is a continuation of what happened in Egypt and Tunisia. Its YouTube channel had 247 video clips uploaded, which received 612,075 views.

Another important Facebook page is "The Iraqi Revolution of 25th of February," which was established on February 11, 2011 (http://ar-ar.facebook.com/Iraq7). The page profile calls on unemployed Iraqis, university graduates, and millions of widows and orphans to protest on February 25, 2011. The most prominent statements focused on political change to achieve democracy and freedom: "Haven't you had enough silence. . . . Haven't you had enough silence. . . . Don't you know that we are like camels carrying gold but eating cactus," which is a reference to government corruption. Another popular Facebook page is the "Movement of Iraqi Revolutionaries," which was established on February 20, 2011. The page profile mentions that the movement was inspired by the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt. Finally, the "Free Iraqis' Revolution" Facebook page has a Kurdish language page. It had 437 followers and was established on March 24, 2011 (http://ar-ar.facebook.com/intifadat.ahrar.aliraq) (see Figure 5). The page profile states that it was created by educated and politically independent Iraqis without considering their ethnic or religious backgrounds. The page organizers claim that over half a million Short Message Service (SMS) are exchanged to create and organize the movement (see Figure 6). Almost all these Facebook pages started posting detailed news and photos on the 2013 antigovernment protests that erupted in Sunni provinces against the Shiite-dominated government of Maliki.
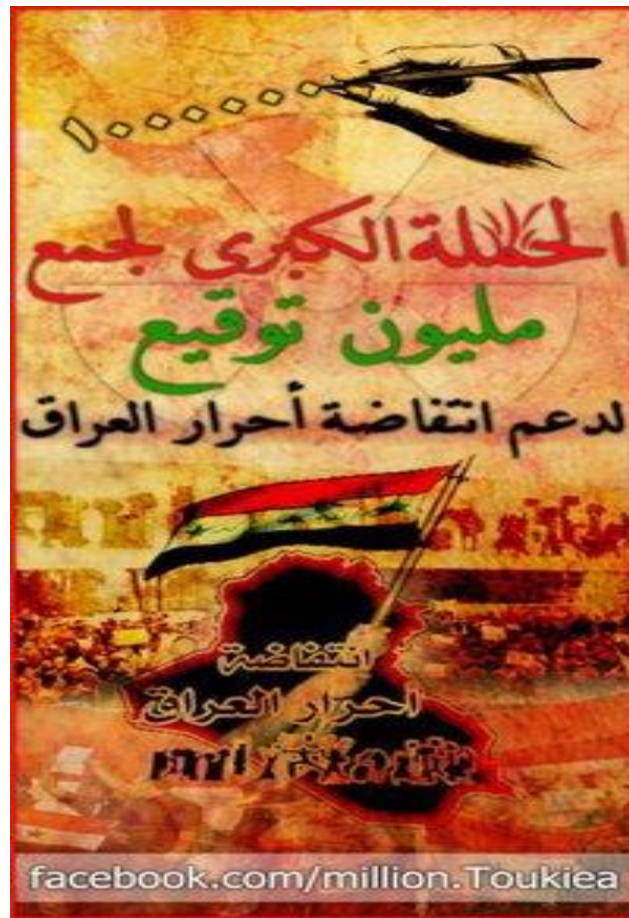
Figure 3. The Iraqi Revolutionary "Victorious by Allah's Will."

Figure 4. Organizing a unity (nonsectarian) protest on July 8, 2011.

Figure 5. The Grand Campaign to collect 1 million
signatures to support the "Free Iraqis' Revolution."

Based on statistics offered by the Socialbakers website on the fan base of the three most popular Facebook pages cited above, most fans come from Iraq, followed by Egypt and Tunisia. However, in the case of the "Support the Iraqi Youth Revolution" Facebook page, most fans (48%) were Iraqis living in Egypt, followed by others in Iraq (9.1%). Most fans of "The Iraqi Revolution of 25th of February" Facebook page were from Iraq (62.9%), and 3.5% were from the United States. "The Grand Iraqi Revolution" page had mostly Iraqi followers (49.7%); Egypt came second with 12.2%, followed by Tunisia with 4.0% (Socialbakers, 2013).[9]

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[9] Other active Facebook pages include "The Night of Maliki's Fall"; "I Hate Nouri Al-Maliki"; "All of Us Support the 25 February Revolution to Free Iraq"; "The Iraqi Intifada"; "The Great Iraqi Revolution"; "No to Silence, Baghdad Won't Be Kandahar"; "The Iraqi Rage Revolution/ No Silence After Today"; "Together for the Liberation of Iraq"; "Support Iraq by Your Pen—The Grand Iraqi Revolution"; "Join the Largest
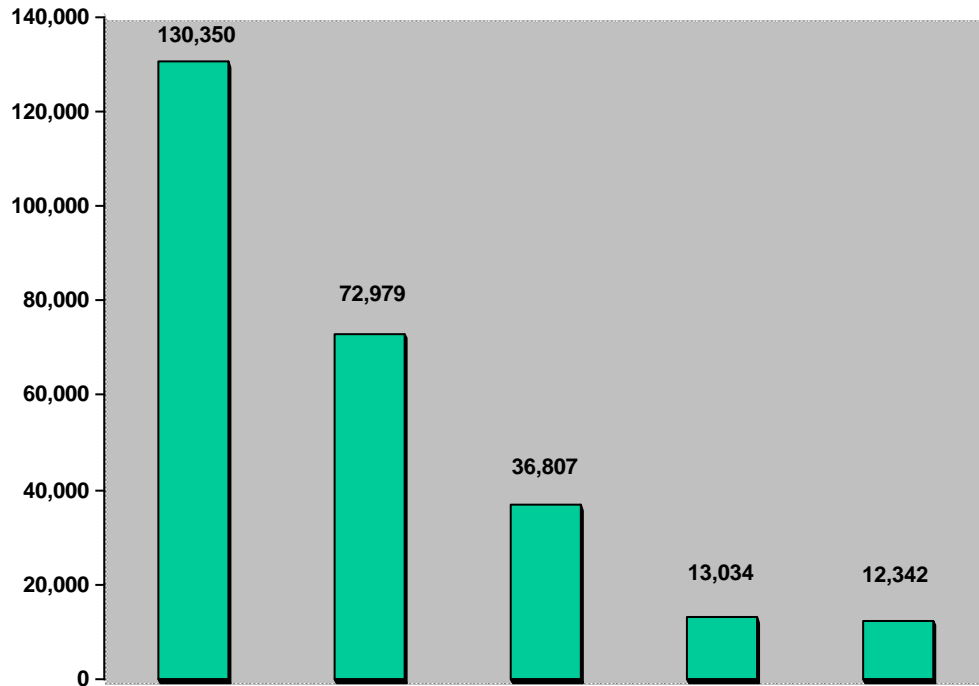
Figure 6. The most popular Facebook pages during the Arab Spring in Iraq.

Some websites were created to support the protestors' cause. For example, on "Iraqi Revolution" (http://iraqirevolution.com), Iraqi activists cited news and wrote updates on the protests taking place in different parts of the country. The site contained links to Facebook pages such as "The Grand Iraqi Revolution," which seems to be affiliated with it. Blogs such as the pan-Arab website "Nady el Fikr" (http://www.nadyelfikr.com) were also active in drawing attention of Iraqi youth. In brief, Facebook played a crucial role in organizing Iraqi protesters inside and outside the country and functioned as a virtual platform where they met and discussed the news of antigovernment protests.

Gathering of Youth in Baghdad"; "One Voice for the Success of the Iraqi Youth Revolution on 25 February: Our Meeting at Tahrir Square"; "Iraqi Blue Revolution"; and 'The Iraqi Will Not Be Silenced Anymore: The Upcoming Purple Revolution." The latter page was created for Iraqis to "alleviate injustice and calls for a dignified life that is devoid of marginalization for the aim of establishing a decent life and work opportunity. No to sectarianism, ignorant people corruption, and enemies of art and culture."

YouTube as an Alternative Media Channel in Iraq

There is no doubt that one of the most important social media channels in the world today is YouTube. It can be regarded as a social force by itself since its impact changed peoples' lives around the globe. Statistics published by YouTube reveal that more than 800 million unique users watch clips on YouTube every month, amounting to more than 3 billion hours of video clips. Almost every minute, 72 hours of video are uploaded, and by 2011 YouTube had over 1 trillion views, making up 140 views for each person in the world (YouTube, 2012). According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism in 2012, YouTube has become a news source for most people around the world. The study, which spanned 15 months from January 2011 to March 2012, concluded:

> Citizens are creating their own videos about news and posting them. They are also actively sharing news videos produced by journalism professionals. And news organizations are taking advantage of citizen content and incorporating it into their journalism. Consumers, in turn, seem to be embracing the interplay in what they watch and share, creating a new kind of television news. (Journalism.org, 2012, para. 7)

After the civil war that erupted in Iraq in 2006, YouTube increasingly became a venue by which Iraqis voiced their concerns, hopes, and ideas. This included posting jokes, which are regarded as a way to escape a gloomy political and social life. These jokes involved "dark humour, with British and American soldiers, firebrand clerics and the danger of terrorist attacks featuring in 'blooper' videos" (Telegraph.co.uk, 2008, para. 1). The different parties to the conflict—Muslim militants, activists, and ordinary Iraqis as well as U.S. military personnel—were all using YouTube and disseminating their own versions of the truth with regard to the conflict in the country. However, these sides frequently engaged in voicing "slurs and threats when challenging an opposing point of view" (Tomlinson, 2008, para. 9). Susan Carruthers (2008) called this phenomenon the "first YouTube war" (p. 75).

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the demographic distributions of YouTube video and comment posters in relation to the Arab Spring in Iraq?
2. What are the geographic locations of the most dominant poster groups?

Methodology

A webometric analyst tool was used to mine video clips and comments posted during the Arab Spring in Iraq (Thelwall, 2009). Detailed information on the video posters and those commenting on the clips was collected to answer the research questions and understand the demographic variables such as sex, age, and location. Relevant Arabic keyword searches included "Day of Rage" in Iraq (382 clips), "Tahrir Square protests" in Iraq (62 clips), "Iraqi Revolution" (403 clips), and "Iraqi Intifada" (18 clips). The total number of clips examined was 865, and any irrelevant clips were removed from the analysis. A

total of 806 video clips were analyzed. These clips had a total of 1,235,114 view counts and 2,839 comments. The clips uploaded fell into the following categories: eyewitness accounts recording the protests directly, testimonials in which young Iraqis express their views on the revolt, news reports from TV stations on the protests, songs and chants with subtitles that urge the protesters to continue their efforts, and edited videos with images or scenes of Iraqi protesters and politicians.

The video clips received 459 dislikes and 2,565 likes. One clip had 94 dislikes; it contained footage of protestors burning the Kuwaiti flag because of the decision of Kuwait's government to build a port that was thought to block Iraq's marine pathway into the Persian Gulf (Y5spmlUjQz4). Few negative or antiprotest clips were uploaded. One Iraqi YouTube poster was very active in uploading video clips under the slogan "Group for Changing the Ideas of the Day of Rage," urging protesters to stop their activities. The YouTube user is "MrIraqfuture," and his or her channel clearly supports Maliki, because most of the clips focus on the activities and views of the prime minister, some of which are raw footage that was not aired on television. Some other video clips contain insulting attacks against Maliki's political opponent, Ayad Allawi, such as one clip entitled "Ayad Allawi's Speech: Bluffing" (YouTube, 2011). A couple of YouTube clips made fun of drunk Iraqi protesters to demean their cause.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study showed that the majority of the video posters were males, indicating a gap between the two sexes. Men uploaded 590 (73.2%) of the video clips, and women uploaded 78 (9.6%) of the video clips. The most active posters were "iraqerevolution" (297 clips), "rabitacanada" (69 clips), "iraqvsusa" (48 clips), "Awlaki100" (27 clips), and "ArabsRevolution" (24 clips).

Men posted 2,132 (75%) comments, and women posted 262 (9.2%) comments. This disparity between men and women users corresponds with the figures cited earlier on Facebook use in Iraq (Socialbakers, 2011). The apparent lack of interest in politics and social movements among Iraqi women might be linked to Iraq's poor public services and unsteady Internet connections. Most Iraqis seek Internet cafes to browse the net; these places are usually restricted to men, so women are likely to be harassed if they enter. Some Internet cafes cater to women, but their numbers remain low (Majeed, 2009). This is an important reason that explains the poor online participation among women in the events of the Arab Spring in Iraq. Also, Iraqi women are affected by the sectarian divisions and religious polarization in the society similar to the situation of men, and this further restricts their movement that is mostly limited within their own communities or regions (Al-Rawi, 2010). Al-Hammadany and Heshmati (2011) conducted a survey on Internet use in Iraq in which 15,835 questionnaires were distributed in different Iraqi provinces. The authors found a gap in Internet use between men and women; 64% (7,637) of Iraqi men use the Internet, compared to 34% (4,126) of Iraqi women. The mode of accessing the Internet varied, but most (67%) preferred Internet cafes. Al-Hammadany and Heshmati explained that Internet cafes are popular in Iraq because they are "convenient, cheap, and an easy way to access the Internet for users with minimal time" (p. 1976). The case of Iraqi women is not unique in the Arab world. Many other scholars have examined the political marginalization of women in many Arab countries, which might negatively impact their online activism. Fatima S. Kassem describes the condition of Arab women during the Arab Spring as follows:

Women are asked to go back home after having actively participated in the uprisings. They do not figure prominently in the post-revolt councils and committees. Women are subjected to a plethora of violence from outright harassment to virginity tests to rape. They are also stripped from previously acquired rights, human rights. (quoted in Heideman & Youssef, 2012, p. 5)

Similar to what happened to many women protesters in Egypt, women were less seen in the streets of Iraq for fear of being sexually harassed or attacked partly because of the religiously conservative nature of these Muslim societies. An outspoken Iraqi woman activist and a veteran journalist, Hana Ibrahim, described the Iraqi protests as the "revolution of the poor" and noted that fear was one of the reasons that drove both women and men to stay at home:

People have good reason to be afraid of protesting in Iraq. The regime is ready to use all necessary means to suppress dissent, and at the same time, no solidarity from the media means that both mobilization and repression go unnoticed. (Assir, 2012, para. 10)

As for the age group distribution, it was expected that Iraqi youth would be more involved in online activity, and this was confirmed by the results. Most of the posters were between the ages of 25 and 30, and those 18–24 years old came second. In terms of YouTube comment posters, the 18–24 age group came first with 606 comments, closely followed by the 25–30 age group with 603 comments posted. Most comments were posted by 22-year-olds, with a total of 151 comments (see Figure 7).
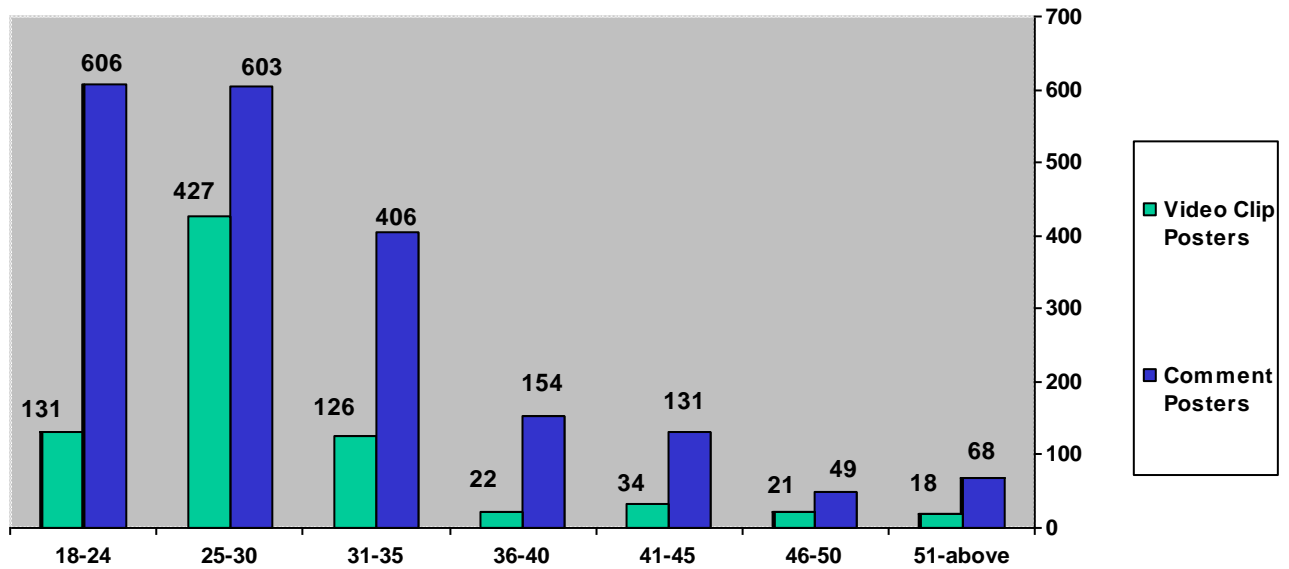
Figure 7. YouTube posters and their age distribution.

To answer the first research question—What are the demographic distributions of YouTube video and comment posters in relation to the Arab Spring in Iraq?—men far exceeded women in the number of comments and videos posted on YouTube. The most active groups of YouTubers were aged 25 to 30, as expected. The other important finding of this study is related to the geographic distribution of posters. It was expected that most of the clips were uploaded from Iraq; however, others living in the diaspora in non-Arab countries were very active during the Arab Spring in Iraq. This was partly due to the fact that many protests were staged in front of Iraqi embassies around the world to support the demonstrations in Iraq. It was expected that YouTube posters living in Syria (before the beginning of the conflict), Egypt, and Jordan would be highly visible, especially because these countries contained more Iraqi refugees than any other countries in the world; instead, those living in the United States (in terms of comments) and Canada (in terms of videos) constituted the second highest number of posters on the Iraqi Arab Spring (see Figure 8). To answer the second research question, most comments and videos were posted from Iraq as expected; however, people living in the West—especially Canada and the United States—were more active than those living in Arab countries.
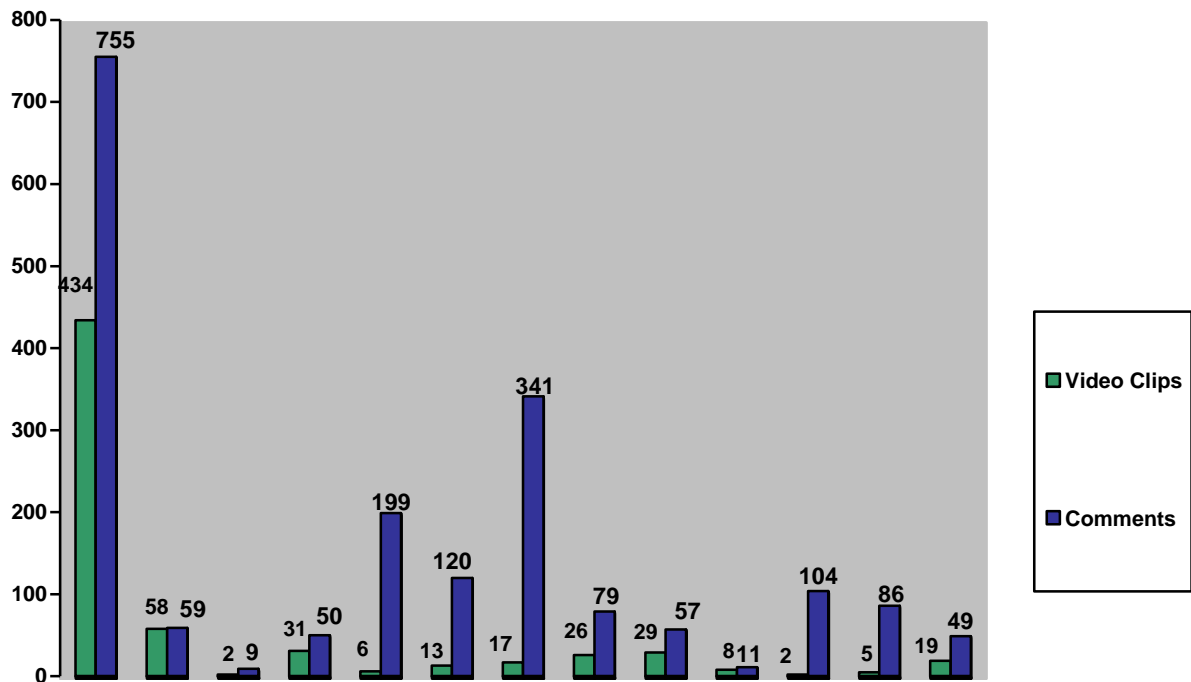
Figure 8. YouTube posters and their geographic locations.

        The finding that Iraqis living in the West are more active online than their counterparts in the Arab world is backed by evidence on some Iraqi blogs and websites that allows readers to view unique visitors' geographic locations. For example, the Iraqi blog "Kulshi wa Kalashi" that is cited above had more than 3,355 unique visitors from the United States, which ranked as the seventh country in the world from which people viewed this blog.[10]

        Added to this evidence, the founders of some of the most popular Iraqi news websites live and work outside Iraq, especially in Europe. Some of these websites include iraq4allnews.dk, which is run from

[10] "Shalash Al-Iraqi" had 6,975 unique visitors from the United States, 2,330 from France, 2,038 from Germany, 2,668 from the United Kingdom, and 2,559 from Sweden. Each country individually exceeds the number of unique visitors from other Arab countries. Egypt had 1,008 visitors, Jordan had 558 visitors, and Syria had 531 visitors. The famous Iraqi blog "Ghar Ishtar" had 44, 505 unique visitors from Iraq, in the first rank, while the United States came second with 31,313 visitors. Finally, the "Wijhat Nadhar" website had 31,511 visitors from Iraq and 24,248 from the United States.

Denmark by Sarmad Abdul Karim, and Kitabat.com, which is run from Germany and was founded by Ayad Al-Zamili, who created it in September 2002.[11]

Many of the comments posted on YouTube on Iraq during the Arab Spring contained a great deal of obscenity and insulting remarks, mostly against Iraq's Prime Minister Maliki. This phenomenon is not unusual; many scholars have noticed similar obscene language when studying other topics on YouTube (Lindgren 2011, p. 133). This feature of online videos can be attributed to an Internet disinhibition effect or flaming (Crystal, 2001; Suler, 2004).

Conclusion

Unlike the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, the protests in Iraq were less violent and were mostly aimed at improving public services and countering corruption rather than toppling the government. However, the official reaction against the protests is similar to what happened in Iran in the sense that traditional media outlets were restricted from covering the events, driving activists in the two countries to use social media as an alternative media channel. Indeed, the Arab Spring in Iraq revealed Maliki's vulnerabilities in encountering public anger on the Internet. Facebook and YouTube created a "networked public sphere" with their important roles in organizing the demonstrations and uniting the public opinion that forced Maliki to stress the need for implementing political reformations. The relatively small group of young Iraqis who participated in the protests in the streets or online ultimately led to the resignation of four top Iraqi officials and pressured the prime minister into pledging to correct the wrongdoings of his government within 100 days.

The Arab Spring in Iraq clearly showed that because of the availability of SNSs government efforts to silence dissent cannot succeed in the future. The study presented evidence that Internet penetration and the use of SNSs in Iraq are rapidly increasing because of government and public needs. In 2013, many protests erupted in Sunni provinces as thousands of Iraqis demanded more political rights and equality. Maliki's government used several mainstream media outlets to discredit the cause of those protesters and called them Al-Qaeda followers and Saddam Hussein sympathizers (Arango, 2013, p. A5), similar to the way protesters were described by Maliki's government in 2011. On the other hand, Maliki suspended the licenses of 10 TV channels that criticized his crackdown on protesters who allegedly incited violence (BBC News, 2013). Once more, activists bypassed the government's news blackout by posting updated information on the protests on Facebook and YouTube. Because of the widespread availability and use of SNSs, the Iraqi government can no longer suppress public anger by means of controlling traditional media outlets.

The results of this study revealed a significant gender gap—mostly attributed to the nature of the Iraqi culture, which does not encourage women to actively participate in the political process and that has surely affected their online participation. Other possible explanations for the gender gap in online

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[11] An Iraqi writer who posted an article on Kitabat.com in which he described government corruption received a libel lawsuit filed by the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki (Human Rights Watch, 2011, p. 43).

participation include unstable Internet access in Iraq, social polarization, security risks, and potential harassment at Internet cafes. The study finds that Iraqi youth are more involved and active online than other age groups.

Based on the evidence regarding the geographic locations of YouTube posters, it can be assumed that the other revolutions that swept the Arab world also involved active online participation from Arabs living in the diaspora. For instance, Wael Ghonim, who was very involved in the protests in Egypt, was based in the United Arab Emirates rather than Egypt before the events of the Arab Spring. Indeed, this assumption can be supported by empirical evidence derived from the analysis of YouTube clips on the protests that took place in other Arab countries.

Finally, some observers are concerned with the rise of some conservative Islamic movements after the Arab Spring in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. Yet the protests in Iraq offer hope, since Facebook and other outlets provide a virtual tool to bridge the sectarian and ethnic divisions in Iraqi society that are caused by politicians and their wrong policies. In other words, these online and offline protests functioned as social bridges to bring together the different sects and communities after suffering from the 2006 civil war, allowing young Iraqis to transcend their ethnic and sectarian differences and be united in their efforts to achieve the required reforms.

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