NDI

INFORMATION DISORDER IN IRAQ

TRENDS, PERCEPTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

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1. Executive Summary

This report analyzes case studies and trends of misinformation and disinformation in Iraq, showcasing that information disorder is widespread in the country. Information disorder ranges from harmless instances of parody to malicious content that targets activists and marginalized communities, resulting in devastating consequences. Over the last few years, this has led to the death of vulnerable people, disruption to the COVID-19 vaccination drive and increased political instability following the October 2021 parliamentary elections.

Several civil society organizations (CSOs), with funding from international donors such as the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom, have implemented activities to address information disorder. These include capacity building, awareness raising and combating the spread of information disorder through social media. However, Iraq also needs better legislation to counter this growing threat. To this end, civil society plays an important role in raising awareness with legislators and those involved in drafting laws. This must be complemented with efforts to implement those laws properly with the help of civil servants, the judiciary and security forces.

The report also recommends program approaches to monitor information spaces and raise awareness about critical issues such as the environment, politics, human rights and cultural heritage. This should go hand-in-hand with support for the development of independent media organizations in Iraq.

This report argues that established social media organizations, such as Meta and Twitter, can play a crucial role in preventing information disorder by regulating popular accounts that spread disinformation. Finally, any approach taken to counter information disorder must take specific steps to ensure that members of vulnerable communities are protected.

2. Introduction

For decades, the information space in Iraq has been affected by multiple compounding factors. During the period of dictatorship, the Ba'ath regime controlled access to information and all of Iraq's media outlets. Those who criticized the government were imprisoned, punished by death, or faced other legal repercussions.[1] The general public could only access three state-controlled TV stations, and both newspapers and radio channels were under strict state supervision. Internet access was similarly limited to a few cyber cafes and websites. Consequently, the Ba'ath regime had total control of media narratives and the information space,[2] with the Committee to Protect Journalists (ICJ) arguing that Iraq had the most restricted media of any Middle Eastern country.[3]

Post-2003, Iraq's information space has opened up, but only to those who have power and resources. At first, US-sponsored media institutions such as Al-Hurra and Radio Sawa were fully funded and tried to impose a western-backed US narrative.[4] Then with time, the political elites in Iraq started funding their own media institutions, in an attempt to impose their agendas and spread their views.[5] Today, Iraq's media landscape is extremely partisan and nearly all outlets are owned privately by politicians. Those institutions funded by the political elite gradually spread onto social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, where misinformation and disinformation continued to be pervasive and contribute to the information disorder in Iraq.

The report outlines and defines key concepts related to information disorder and analyzes trends in Iraq. Particular focus is attributed to dialogue related to political instability following the October 2021 elections, socio-economic issues, and health, including the COVID-19 pandemic.The report also examines the public perception and media consumption in Iraq, and the implications of continued information disorder in the country. Finally, the report provides recommendations on how information disorder might be combated in Iraq.

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1   Kimberly Tabor, 'The Press in Iraq', *PBS Frontline*, November 2022. Available at: https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/iraq/press.html

2   Benjamin Isakhan, 'Manufacturing consent in Iraq: interference in the post-Saddam media sector', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, May 2009, pp.7-26.

3   Kimberly Tabor, 'The Press in Iraq', *PBS Frontline*, November 2022. Available at: https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/iraq/press.html

4   James Pamment, 'American Strategic Communication in Iraq: The "Rapid Reaction Media Team"', *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 2/2, April 2012.

5   Zaid Salem, 'Iraqi parties are investing in the media', *Middle East Monitor*, October 2022. Available at: https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221011-iraqi-parties-are-investing-in-the-media/

To understand what information disorder is, the report defines specific terminology based on studies conducted by Claire Wardle.[6]

Disinformation is purposely false information intended to inflict harm. It is driven by three factors: making money, gaining international or local political power, and causing problems with the aim of achieving a particular end. When disinformation is disseminated through other social media users, it frequently becomes misinformation. *Misinformation* sometimes refers to erroneous information, although the source is unaware that it is wrong or misleading. Often, a person is unaware that a piece of misinformation is untrue and would harmlessly spread it with their networks. Researchers at IONA University tried to analyze the effects of misinformation/disinformation on various levels[7]. While some information can be harmless and may be widely circulated with the purpose of spreading joy, such as parody posts, other fabricated content may lead to harm, including threats, targeted attacks or death. The IONA researchers categorized misinformation/disinformation according to their risk level.

- The first is *satire and parody*, which includes creative comedy or entertainment that may be somewhat truthful however, these can become dangerous if shared without context. An example of this is the satirical website *Al-Hudood*, which shared a story on how the Iraqi government is calling on protestors to reveal their foreign agendas so that the government can also take advantage and earn money. [8]
- The second is *false connections*[9], which are usually used in clickbait headlines to produce money and profit. Usually less-savvy internet users will click on these links, which may not necessarily be dangerous but could lead to people falsely believing the content. An example of this is the misinformation that actor Morgan Freeman converted to Islam.[10]
- The third is *misleading content*, which refers to deceptive content that is distorted to present a particular scenario . Instead of providing facts to allow individuals to formulate their own opinions, misleading material frequently claims to be neutral while lobbying for a certain viewpoint. An example of this is when social media pages circulated an old picture of Iraqi Shia singer, Basem al-Karbalai claiming that he uses his money to vacation in Hawaii. While in fact the pictures are from 2021 in Turkey.[11]

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6   Claire Wardle, "Understanding information disorder", *First Draft*, September 2020. Available at: https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/
7   IONA university, "Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation", *Research Essentials*, November 2022. Available at: https://guides.iona.edu/researchessentials/disinformation
8   See more: https://alhudood.net/29849
9   IONA university, "Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation", *Research Essentials*, November 2022. Available at: https://guides.iona.edu/researchessentials/disinformation
10   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-11-21-morgan-freeman
11   See more: https://t4p.co/article/2022-10-26-basim-karbalaei

- The fourth is *false context*[12], in which authors purposely leave out crucial information and present complex situations in a simplified manner or even an image, to guide public opinion in a specific direction. An example of this is when social media pages posted about a drowning water drainage station in Saudi Arabia from 2017 and claiming it was in Iraq during the winter of 2022.[13]

- The fifth is *imposter content* refers to templates taken from official websites and presented in a believable manner. This is widely used in Iraq, especially with templates from al-Sharqiya or al-Iraqiya TV stations. As one example, misinformation was spread about the Sadrist movement using al-Iraqis TV station template.[14]

- The sixth is *manipulated content*, which can include photoshopped images or deep fakes. There are many examples of this within the Iraqi media sphere, especially in relation to protest signs and official letters. [15]

- The last type is *fabricated content*, which are falsified stories and can be very dangerous if used against someone in a strategic manner[16]. One example of this is the fabricated video created and distributed targeting Rihab Yaacoub, a civil society activist in Basra, showing Riham leading protesters in chants during recent demonstrations during the 2020 Tishreen protests. Several month laters, due to the wide circulation of the video on social media, Riham was executed by militia members angered by the video[17].

Complexity defines information disorder. Some of it may be regarded as low-level information pollution — clickbait headlines, poor captions, even humor — but some of it can be profoundly misleading. Additionally, research demonstrates that incorrect information is more likely to propagate on social media platforms, particularly in regard to political news.[18] In addition to authoritarian governments and terrorist organizations, mainstream political parties are increasingly manipulating social media to "restrict human rights, defame political opponents, and drown out alternative voices." Additionally, it was proven that trolls and troll farms, bots, and cyber warfare are all strategies that political actors employ to achieve this aim.[19]

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12 Checkology, "Five types of misinformation", *News Literacy Project*, November 2021. Available at: https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Misinformation_Nov2021.pdf

13 See more: https://t4p.co/article/2022-11-12-rainwater-pumping-stations

14 See more: https://t4p.co/article/2022-11-06-the-sadrist-movement

15 See more: https://t4p.co/article/2022-10-05-women-freedom-in-iraq and https://t4p.co/article/2022-11-05-cancellation-mandatory-service-allowances

16 Claire Wardle, "Understanding information disorder", *First Draft*, September 2020. Available at: https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/

17 Benedict Robin-D'croz, "Why did they Kill Riham Yaacoub", August 2020. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/08/24/why-did-they-kill-riham-yacoub-the-murder-of-a-civil-society-activist-in-basra/

18 Sara Brown, "MIT Sloan research about social media, misinformation, and elections", *MIT*, October 2020. Available at: https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/mit-sloan-research-about-social-media-misinformation-and-elections

19 Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, "The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation", *Oxford Internet Institute*, 2019. Available at: https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/posts/the-global-disinformation-order-2019-global-inventory-of-organised-social-media-manipulation/

3. Trends of Misinformation and Disinformation in Iraq

In order to analyze trends of information disorder in Iraq, Tech4Peace (T4P) carried out a basic discourse analysis.[20] By analyzing the main topics of information disorder captured by T4P in Iraq throughout the past year, four main areas of focus were chosen. Those topics were chosen based on the number of posts containing misinformation and/or disinformation in addition to the interaction and outreach those posts received. For example, in August 2022, T4P detected a total of 270 misinformation/disinformation cases online. 127 out of the 270 cases were related to the political situation and post-election politics. Similarly, health related posts, specifically COVID-19 misinformation, represented around 35 percent of the cases detected by T4P in April 2020.

Different time periods and topics were taken into consideration to reach a conclusion on how trends of misinformation and disinformation are used in Iraq in different contexts. This section will cover the post-election period and subsequent political instability, the economic situation and sharing of false promises, and the health sector with a focus on COVID-19 misinformation.

3.1 Post-election Political Instability

During the government formation process which took place between October 2021 and October 2022, several political actors attempted to manipulate public opinion in favor of certain political players. Misinformation and disinformation were utilized by different political actors throughout their various media platforms. Most notably the Shiite Coordination Framework (SCF), which sought to form the government, and the Sadrist Trend, who demanded new elections after withdrawing from parliament, used social media channels to denigrate the other party. The political instability this created manifested itself in the violent street clashes that took place in Iraq's Green Zone in August 2022. During this period, information disorder led to the dissemination

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20   Discourse analysis is a framework that was used to analyze social media posts detected by T4P including texts, interactions and social practices. The aim is to reveal the motivation and politics behind these posts once identified as part of the information disorder. More on this: Tebogo Mogashoa, "Understanding Critical Discourse Analysis in Qualitative Research", *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education*, 2014

of misleading information and confusion among the general public.[21] The examples below show how information disorder was used to delegitimize and discredit political opponents in violent ways. In this setting, Iraqi media sources, particularly social media, were disseminating misleading messages that may be seen as favoring one side over the other. The goal was to alter public opinion in specific areas or to gauge the level of acceptance of such news among ordinary Iraqis.[22]

In September 2022, when there were uncertainties around the Sadrists' next steps, various social media channels disseminated false information attacking the Sadrist movement, portraying them as violent and willing to disrupt the political process. One assertion that spread among multiple Facebook pages was that Saraya al-Salam,[23] the armed wing of the Sadrists, was attacking al-Askari mosque in Samarra[24]. In addition, some media outlets cited a false statement from the former Sadrist Bahaa al-Araji where he mentioned a plan to storm the Green Zone a week before the actual assault.[25] The nature of these posts implied that the Sadrists planned the attack ahead of time. In reality, the attacks were more spontaneous and many Sadrists who attacked the Green Zone lacked direction and clear orders.[26]

Other social media platforms implied that Sadrists and Ammar al-Hakim decided to sabotage any future government advancement.[27] The utilization of this false information implied that the Sadrists employed coercion and manipulation to delay government formation.[28] This piece of disinformation was published on more than 18 Facebook pages and had thousands of interactions. In addition, some media outlets that are pro-SCF attempted to link the Sadrists to corruption[29] by disseminating claims of a leaked recording between prominent Sadrist official Ghayib al-Omairi and the Minister of Health in an attempt to link the party to corruption within the Ministry of Health.[30] Similar platforms implied that the SCF would improve the lives of Iraqis by achieving better exchange rates, more employment, and higher earnings. This would reverse

21   Suadad Al-Salhy, "Fear, a fatwa, and bloodshed: Inside the battle for Iraq's Green Zone", *Middle East Eye*, September 2022. Available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-green-zone-battle-inside-fear-fatwa-bloodshed

22   Although determining the underlying intentions behind the distribution of misinformation and disinformation is challenging, known trends, timing, and reactions allow us to provide basic analysis of the origins and targets of such material

23   Saraya al-Salam is the armed wing of the Sadrists, they are part of the PMF

24   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-09-25-saraya-alsalam

25   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-09-02-bahaa-alaraji-statement

26   Suadad Al-Salhy, "Fear, a fatwa, and bloodshed: Inside the battle for Iraq's Green Zone", *Middle East Eye*, September 2022. Available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-green-zone-battle-inside-fear-fatwa-bloodshed

27   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-09-26-baha-alaraji-statement

28   While Sadrists have used these methods to delay government formation. The mentioned examples of misinformation are false and seem to be targeted to affect their reputation

29   There are many concrete examples of Sadrists linked to corruption. However, the misinformation here are more targeted and exaggerated

30   More information on this: https://t4p.co/article/2022-09-07-ghaib-alomeiri

the most significant choices made by the Sadrists while they were in power. s.[31] This suggests that the Sadrists are implicated in corruption, which would negatively impact the public's view of them.

In an attempt to manipulate public opinion against the demonstrators of Tishreen, Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF)-supported social media platforms released misleading materials. For example, one platform released a fake statement from prominent media personnel who had been covering the protest movement, Steven Nabil, claiming that he no longer wants to be connected with the protest movement.[32] Other posts demonized activists by disseminating false information that they were Baathists and that PMF security forces had captured them.[33]

Some of the narratives coming from individuals who are working on specific agendas have been direct and specific.. For example, Qais al-Khazaali, leader of Assaib Ahalulhaq paramilitary group tweeted in March 2021 that an Emirate security team came to Iraq to control the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS).[34] While this has been refuted by official channels,[35] such accusations and similar ones remain influential on the public's beliefs and affect the narratives in the public sphere.

3.2 Socio-economic Issues

Several media outlets have taken advantage of Iraq's dire economic situation to disseminate mis- and disinformation in an attempt to influence public opinion on particular issues, such as supporting certain political parties based on their promises for economic reform. Some media outlets also sensationalize headings related to socio-economic issues to attract clicks and shares which expands their reach.

In December 2020, Iraq's central bank announced changing the exchange rate of the Iraqi Dinar (IQD) to US Dollar (USD) from 1190 IQD for each USD to 1450 IQD for each USD. Social media pages affiliated with political parties steered public opinion in one direction or the other, resulting in a wave of anger across the country. Multiple attempts were made through affiliated media channels to blame the exchange rate hike on opposing political parties to improve their image. Additionally, it was used to highlight the need to rectify the poor decision making through public mobilization against the

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31   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-09-29-coordinating-framework-pledge
32   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-09-27-steven-nabil-october-revolution
33   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-09-11-accusing-baath-party-membership
34   See: https://twitter.com/qais_alkhazali/status/1371152851809013763
35   Amwaj Media, "Iraqi commander: Emirati team arrived to 'run' intelligence service", *Amwaj*, March 2021. Available at: https://amwaj.media/ar/media-monitor/a-paramilitary-group-accuses-baghdad-of-facilitating-emirati-infiltration

government. [36] At the same time, other platforms tried to improve the government's image by rationalizing the new exchange rates through fabricated news or implying that the decision will be reversed.[37]

The financial position of the average Iraqi is not improving. There has been a gradual drop in living standards, accompanied by rising exchange rates and costs for essential goods. As competition developed among the political elite and the desire to be seen as having done something to combat the dire socio-economic situation, the legislature adopted the emergency food security bill in June 2022[38] instead of the federal budget. Due to the complexity of the situation inside the Iraqi bureaucracy, the present economic crisis and the adoption of the food security law have led to a variety of misinformation and deception in Iraqi media sources. Misleading assertions of financial gifts in the form of grants to all citizens of Iraq were disseminated on social media platforms aiming to gain clicks or steal personal information from people by scamming them[39]. These include false reports from international specialists regarding the food security law[40] and misinformation of the inclusion of various Iraqi employees, such as volunteer lecturers, in the food security bill's wage plan.[41] In addition, fabricated job postings requesting applications for positions inside the bureaucracy, particularly the Ministry of Oil, have been circulated.[42]

3.3 Health (including COVID-19)

In Iraq, the COVID-19 outbreak introduced a new backdrop of uncertainty and fear. Trust in the government and affiliated institutions, particularly medical institutions, was at an all-time low, especially after many Iraqis died as a result of fires in hospitals caused by corruption and the spread of fake and expired[43] medications.[44] False rumors circulated that the government would use COVID-19 as a justification to suppress the protest movement and freedom of movement in general,[45] or to delay public sector wage payments. Frequent misinformation circulated that the virus was produced by the United States or, in certain circumstances, was being utilized by the Islamic State

36   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-02-03-central-bank
37   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-02-20-taif-sami
38   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-06-08-emergency-support-act-voting
39   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-06-06-financial-grant
40   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-06-11-david-card-food-security-law
41   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-06-01-lecturers-emergency-law-support
42   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-06-13-iraqi-oil-ministry-employees
43   Renad Mansour, "Moving medicine in Iraq", *Chatham House*, November 2022. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/11/moving-medicine-iraq-networks-fuelling-everyday-conflict
44   BBC, "Iraq hospital fire: Protests as Covid ward blaze kills at least 92", *BBC*, July 2021. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-57814954
45   Azhar Al-Rubayi, "'Coronavirus won't stop us': Iraqis vow to continue protests despite spread of lethal virus", *Middle East Eye*, February 2020. Available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-wont-stop-us-iraqis-vow-continue-protests-despite-spread-lethal-virus

of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to enable the group's return to Iraq. All of these narratives were promoted on television and social media.[46] Dis- and misinformation also spread on alleged cures and preventions for COVID-19 including gargling water mixed with salt which proved to be scientifically inaccurate.[47]

There is evidence that due to the impact of disinformation, rural and tribal people have been less inclined to get vaccinated.[48] As a result, anti-establishment forces have appropriated the state's communication and narrative around the pandemic, including in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[49]

Mis- and disinformation spreads in the health sector when diseases spread due to the lack of proper awareness on certain health issues. For example, cholera is widespread in Iraq , but a lot of published misinformation suggests it is only spread among children.[50] These narratives continue to erode Iraq's information environment.

3.4 Social and Other Trends

Information disorder greatly impacts those concerns that matter most to citizens, including education, the environment, religion and a range of other topics circulated with the intent of generating clicks or exposure. However, in certain instances, misinformation posts are created to gauge public opinion or to change it. The most prominent examples are posts that are published by social media platforms supporting certain political or religious groups.

An example of trying to link negative issues to specific groups is the increase in the flow of narcotics into Iraq, which generated misinformation that the PMF is involved in the drug trade and imports drugs from Iran.[51] Despite the fact that there are links between narcotics smuggling and Iranian backed armed groups,[52] these kinds of posts, directed at certain factions, aim to gain exposure and target the reputation of those groups.

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46   Aida Al-Kaisy, "Disinformation in Iraqi Media", *LSE Middle East Centre*, October 2021. Available at: https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/112476/1/MEC_paper_55_disinformation_in_the_iraqi_media.pdf

47   See: https://t4p.co/article/2020-06-24-gurgling-with-saline-and-covid-19

48   World Bank, "COVID-19 Vaccine Inequities and Hesitancy in Iraq", *World Bank*, April 2022. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/publication/covid-19-vaccine-inequities-and-hesitancy-in-iraq

49   Araz Ahmad, "The Impact of Social Media on Panic During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Iraqi Kurdistan: Online Questionnaire Study", *The Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22/5 May 2020. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7238863/

50   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-12-11-cholera-affects-children

51   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-04-12-onions-contains-drugs

52   Abullah Al-Bashir, "Smuggling is an extra economic resource for Iraq's militias", The New Arab, November 2022. Available at: https://www.alaraby.co.uk/economy/التهريب-رافد-اقتصادي-لمليشيات-مسيطرة-على-الحدود-السورية-مع-العراق

Information disorder has affected religious movements and figures as well. For example, Shia Marja' Mahmoud Al-Sarkhi[53] and his followers attracted public attention because of a Friday prayer where they called to destroy Shiite holy sites[54]. Social media outlets attempted to exploit the situation to support their narrative by spreading misinformation or exaggerating the situation to earn further attention or denigrate particular sects of Islam.[55] This manipulation of information by social media outlets that support traditional Shia Islam caused mis- and disinformation to spread, ending up threatening the life of the Marja' in addition to the followers.

Some sites attempted to establish a connection between Al-Sarkhi and ISIS by displaying a fabricated video of ISIS militants vowing loyalty to Al-Sarkhi.[56] Some pages linked well-known Iraqi protester Dhurgham Majid to Al-Sarkhi through a fabricated photo to undermine Majid's reputation among protestors.[57] To many, Majid has been very vocal and can rally up supporters in protests against the government, hence there has been many attempts to defame him through misinformation.

The deteriorating condition of Iraq's environment is also becoming increasingly obvious to the public. For example, Iraq has recently experienced several sandstorms. In response, disinformation posted online claimed that Saudi Arabia was responsible for causing sandstorms in Iraq, perhaps as a means of deflecting responsibility away from the Iraqi government. This is because blaming Saudi Arabia for such a problem is plausible to some Iraqis, as it is in line with the false popular narrative that the Gulf countries have been negatively impacting Iraq.[58] Other media agencies made fun of the situation, reporting that the Iraqi government is planting plastic trees to avert desertification.[59]

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53   al-Sarkhi is known for his opposition to US and Iranian interference in Iraq and calls for regular protests and gatherings against the religious status quo.

54   BBC, "Mahmoud al-Sarkhi: Who is he and why did he provoke anger in Iraq?", *BBC*, April 2022. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-61092682

55   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-04-13-alsarkhi

56   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-04-14-sarkhi-followers

57   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-04-19-dargham-majed-and-alsarkhi

58   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-04-08-border-saudi-iraq

59   See: https://t4p.co/article/2022-04-25-street-tree-anthropomorphic

4. Public Perceptions and Media Consumption in Iraq

4.1 Analysis of Posts and Responses from Media Consumers

As discussed in the sections above, various disinformation/misinformation trends have emerged focusing on the political, economic, health, social and environmental spheres in Iraq, amongst others. A simplified discourse analysis approach was used to examine information disorder in these sectors. This section continues the analysis of the posts from the section above, focusing mostly on trends detected by T4P in 2020 and 2022.

Politically, Iraqis are exposed to misinformation and fake content on digital platforms and social media. 'Electronic flies' are fraudulent social media profiles run by individuals or bots to spread political messages. Pro-Iranian and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabian electronic armies work online in Iraq to support their geopolitical agendas. The Telegraph uncovered in June 2020 that political organizations in Iraq paid Facebook millions of dollars to promote disinformation through Facebook advertisements. The investigation uncovered phony accounts and sites purporting to represent Iraqi politicians and media organizations. Some of the major networks were supported by paramilitary organizations like Kataib Hezbollah, which is a member of the PMF.[60]

Since a majority of disinformation is spread on social media, companies like META can be responsible for either providing a safe environment or offering guidelines and awareness in regard to the dangers of information disorder. In their latest report on Iraq, META announced the removal of hundreds of Facebook and Instagram accounts that were created in 2020 and 2021. Those accounts were followed by hundreds of thousands of followers where more than $10,000 were spent on advertisements. META announced that those platforms came from Iran or Iran backed groups in Iraq with messages criticizing Israel, the Gulf and supporting the PMF.[61] Some even promoted anti-vaccine messaging (Graph 2).

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60   Wil Crisp and Suadad Al-Salhy, "Iraqi groups paying Facebook millions to churn out fake news", *The Telegraph*, June 2020. Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2020/06/14/iraqi-groups-paying-facebook-millions-churn-fake-news/
61   META, "June 2021 coordinated inauthentic behavior report", *Facebook*, June 2021. Available at: https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/June-2021-CIB-Report-Final.pdf

Graph 1: Facebook account promoting disinformation suspended by META[62]

bahloul - بهلول
May 2

هذا مصاب بكورونا لو صابر زومبي؟!

سبحان الله.. هذا مصاب بكورونا لو صابر زومبي؟!

ولا واحد.. هذا ضارب لقاح فايزر...

Translation

Page name: Bahloul

Caption: When are you going to get your occupying soldiers out of our country?

Image overlay:

"Oh my god, is this man infected with Coronavirus or has he become a zombie?!"

"Neither... he got the Pfizer vaccine..."

Another investigation revealed that Hezbollah in Lebanon is training Iraqi PMF affiliates on matters of disinformation. They hosted recruits in Beirut to develop skills in manipulating photographs, managing fake media accounts and avoiding censorship.[63]

When it comes to the health sector and specifically COVID-19, reporting from mid-2021 suggested that misinformation, especially on social media, led to a slow uptake of vaccination, increasing COVID-19 fatalities in Iraq.[64] Additionally, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting in Iraq conducted a nationwide survey where they asked questions regarding the legitimacy of COVID-19 and the vaccination process. They found that 38 percent of 42,000 respondents believed that COVID-19 and vaccination were fabricated for political reasons.[65]

Furthermore, Care International conducted another survey concluding that few individuals have faith in the vaccination procedure. One of the most prevalent arguments people offer for refusing to get vaccinated is that they do not believe the immunizations are intended to prevent COVID-19. Instead, conspiracy theories regarding the effects of the vaccine on fertility, or creating other illnesses have been spread on social media and widely believed by the public. Another prevalent concern is that the immunizations are counterfeit or not the preferred brand.[66]

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62   Ibid

63   Arab news, "Hezbollah's fake news training camps revealed", *Arab News*, August 2020. Available at: https://www.arabnews.com/node/1713611/middle-east

64   Alex MacDonald, "Covid-19: Iraq's doctors struggle against vaccine fears as cases hit new highs", *Middle East Eye*, May 2021. Available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/Iraq-doctors-struggle-Covid-19-vaccine-fears

65   Institute for War and Peace Reporting, "Fake news in Iraq", *IWPR*, June 2020. Available at: https://iwpr.net/global-voices/fake-news-iraq

66   Care International, "COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake in Iraq", *CARE*, August 2021. Available at: https://www.care-international.org/sites/default/files/files/Iraq_Vaccine_Uptake_Study_Summary.pdf

4.2 Survey Analysis and Trends Among Iraqis

Tech4Peace has also conducted surveys on the sources of information for Iraqis (online and offline), their level of trust in different outlets and platforms, their awareness of misinformation and disinformation, their willingness to check for validity of information and the methods they use to this end. The survey results are segregated by gender, geographic location and age which supports later recommendations and provide insight into vulnerable groups and methods for assisting them.
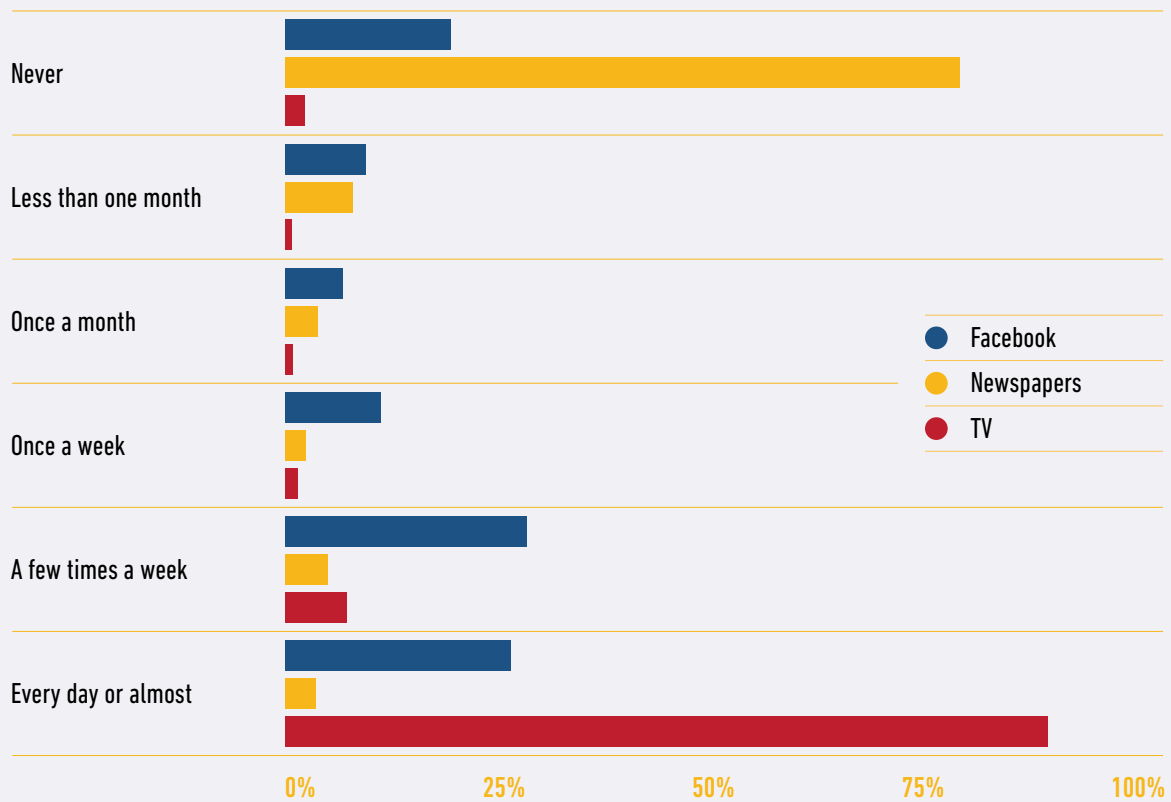
Tech4Peace conducted a survey for the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), where more than 3500 participants completed the survey (82 percent men and 18 percent women) and more than 65 percent of the respondents were under the age of 35 years old. The survey represented samples from all major Iraqi governorates including a small percentage of Iraqis living outside Iraq. Around 39 percent of the respondents reside in Baghdad.

When asked "Please take a look at this list of information sources, and indicate how often you use each of these sources". The survey showed high dependency on online platforms, in particular Facebook in comparison to more traditional news outlets such as newspapers or TV (Graph 3). More than 80 percent of the respondents get their news almost daily from Facebook and the majority do not read newspapers. Iraq has a very young population with more than 60 percent of the citizens under the age of 25,[67] meaning that the majority of the news in Iraq is consumed and disseminated through social media with Facebook being at the center of this.
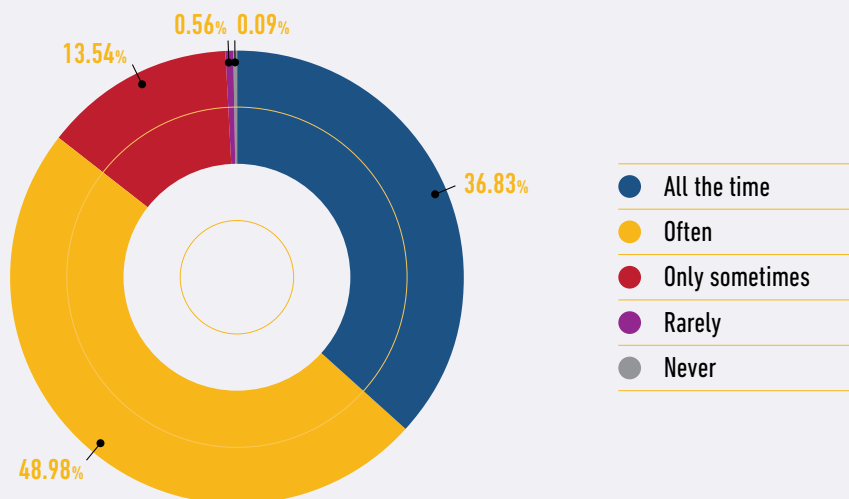
However, when asked about the information they get from social media or the internet "How often, if at all, do you come across news or information on the internet or social media that you believe misrepresent reality or is factually incorrect?", the majority said that they believe that the information they encounter may misrepresent reality or may be factually incorrect. A follow up question asked if they believed the information was deliberately distributed. The majority agreed with this statement however, we cannot be certain that survey respondents believe that this might lead to harm (Graphs 4 and 5).

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67   UN Iraq, "In Iraq, UN Youth Envoy says young people are 'most valuable force we have to shape a better future'", *United Nations*, August 2017. Available at: https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2017/08/in-iraq-un-youth-envoy-says-young-people-are-most-valuable-force-we-have-to-shape-a-better-future/

Graph 2: Sources of Information[68]

Never
Less than one month
Once a month
Once a week
A few times a week
Every day or almost

Legend:
- Facebook
- Newspapers
- TV

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

Graph 3: Encountering Information Disorder[69]

0.56%   0.09%
13.54%
36.83%
48.98%

Legend:
- All the time
- Often
- Only sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

68   Tech4PeaceSurvey, 2022
69   Tech4Peace Survey, 2022

Graph 5: Encountering Deliberate Information Disorder[70]

- ● All the time
- ● Often
- ● Only sometimes
- ● Rarely
- ● Never

The above shows that T4P subscribers have a good understanding of the need to check the information received and are aware of information disorder and the possibility of facing misinformation and disinformation.

70   Tech4Peace Survey, 2022

5. Implications of Ongoing Misinformation and Disinformation in Iraq

5.1 Effects of Disinformation on Iraqis

The effects of information disorder differ depending on content, audience, and message. Sometimes, they can be harmless or easily detected by people, such as satirical posts. In many instances, however, deception and false information can have fatal consequences. For example, due to the dissemination of misleading pictures of a meeting with the US Consul General, Iraqi activist, Riham Yaacoub, was murdered.[71] In addition, misinformation that spread among Iraqis with the purpose of revealing certain characteristics, such as individuals' sexual identities, resulted in the death of a young Iraqi when suspicions circulated that he was a member of the LGBTQI+ community.[72]

Information disorder can also have reputational risks, especially on marginalized groups such as women who are trying to engage in the political process. For example, Intidhar Jassim, a candidate for parliamentary elections, was pressured to withdraw from the 2018 election after an alleged extramarital sex tape went viral online.[73]

In addition to marginalized groups, information disorder can affect those who have certain professions such as media workers and journalists, especially those with no political backing. For example, Iraqi journalists are put at risk by rumors that they support Israel. Such rumors are disinformation spread against journalists who report the corruption of the political elite, hence they get targeted by social media platforms that are funded by those elites. Reporters Without Borders noted a statement spread on social media accusing 12 journalists and human rights advocates of wishing to "normalize ties with

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71   Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "Why Did They Kill Riham Yacoub? The Murder of a Civil Society Activist in Basra ", *LSE Middle East Centre*, August 2020. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/08/24/why-did-they-kill-riham-yacoub-the-murder-of-a-civil-society-activist-in-basra/

72   Aws Al-Saadi, "Rumour kills!", *Al-Aalem Al-Jadeed*, October 2022. Available at: https://al-aalem.com/article/51757-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84

73   Naseem Tarawneh, "Sextortion, harassment, and deep fakes: How digital weapons are being used to silence women", *IFEX*, March 2020. Available at: https://ifex.org/sextortion-harassment-and-deepfakes-how-digital-weapons-are-being-used-to-silence-women/

Israel."[74] By threatening to divulge their personal information, they are put in grave risk. This also affected the journalists' reputation, job security and safety.[75]

This report only highlights a few instances of misinformation and disinformation in Iraq. There are a tremendous number of cases that have led to domestic abuse, political violence, embezzlement, reputational harms, among other issues.

Even if the Iraqi authorities intervene, perpetrators will not be apprehended since Iraq lacks legislation criminalizing such conduct. For example, while the Law to Combat Cyber Crimes was presented as one that would prevent crimes online, it in fact contains vague provisions that can be arbitrarily interpreted in order to crack down on freedom of expression.[76] This law has been on the political agenda since at least 2011, but has never been amended to meet international standards or adopted.

5.2 Projects to Counter Misinformation and Disinformation in Iraq

The above analysis has shown the need to counter information disorder in Iraq. As a consequence, various initiatives have been set up to tackle the issue, including through raising awareness, capacity building, promoting good practice of fact checking and spreading correct information.

Some of these initiatives are mentioned in Annex 1, which includes 25 projects focused on combating misinformation and disinformation in Iraq. Some projects were thematic and had specific goals such as the project implemented by Iraq Foundation and funded by the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq that focused on strengthening women's political participation during the 2021 elections and refuting any mis- or disinformation against women political candidates. Other projects have a more general goal of combating misinformation in general such as *Bahwish* or *Sonar*. However, those projects' continuity will depend on the flow of funds to the organizations which usually comes for a limited time from international donors. All these projects have received international funding and some organizations such as T4P or Al-Amal Association have implemented multiple projects.

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74   This is problematic for Iraqis as the constitution and a recently passed bill criminalize any relations with Israel

75   Reporters without borders, "Dozens of Iraqi journalists blacklisted on social networks ", *RSF*, September 2019. Available at: https://rsf.org/en/dozens-iraqi-journalists-blacklisted-social-networks

76   SMEX, "Iraqi Cybercrime Draft Law: In Suspension ", *Social Media Exchange*, July 2022. Available at: https://smex.org/iraqi-cybercrime-draft-law-in-suspension/

Despite the wide array of projects commissioned to work on the issue of information disorder, the problem persists. Many of these projects are short term initiatives, which are dependent on external funding. There is minimal cooperation between initiatives resulting in wasted efforts and duplication of work. Furthermore, work on legislative issues and on the implementation of legislation is limited in the above projects, which is detrimental to the development of a healthy information sharing environment in Iraq.

Resolving the issue of information disorder in Iraq is a lengthy process that involves the collaboration of several efforts. This is because Iraq's fragile post-conflict context and the lack of a credible media landscape are stifling the ability of independent media to flourish. The historical framework of the country's media and the particular journalistic practices that grew pervasive under the Ba'athist dictatorship continue to define and guide the evolution of the media landscape, and there is no political will to remedy the problem. Public institutions repeatedly fail to create the required foundation for a healthy media environment.[77]

77   Aida Al-Kaisy, "A fragmented landscape. Barriers to independent media in Iraq", *LSE Middle East Centre*,
       June 2019. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100991/1/a_fragmented_landscape.pdf

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This report looked closely at instances where information disorder was used either directly or indirectly to steer public opinion, change perspectives or shift attention in Iraq. Usages of misinformation and disinformation vary from harmless instances of parody to intentionally manipulated and fabricated content, which resulted in violent deaths without accountability. Iraq does not yet have an adequate legislative framework able to counter information disorder and political will to develop such a framework is severely lacking.

Within this context, the development of legislation to counter information disorder should be a long-term strategic goal. Awareness needs to be raised with legislators and those who are involved in drafting the laws. This has to be complemented with efforts to implement those laws properly where civil servants, judiciary and security forces are involved. Such initiatives have been started in the past, but due to continuous changes in the political leadership, shifting priorities and lack of will to combat information disorder, no real progress has been made. However, there is a need to ensure that legislation will not be used to the advantage of the political elite to censor or enforce their own restrictions on freedom of speech.

One such example mentioned above is the draft Law to Combat Cyber Crimes. The current draft bill should be amended following consultations with civil society and relevant experts, with the support of the international community, to bring it into line with international standards. Donor states should also use diplomatic channels to ensure the proper implementation of the law. Other laws, such as access to information and freedom of expression, are also vital. Indirect actions such as ensuring that the Political Parties Law is enforced can also work to limit media usage for the purpose of political propaganda, as well as political parties' and elite's control over the media landscape.

It is also recommended that work to monitor information spaces and raise awareness about critical issues such as the environment, political understandings, human rights and cultural heritage continues. This should go hand-in-hand with supporting independent media and fact-checking institutions, including capacity building initiatives. Organizations should continue to expand their work and promote fact-checking and information sharing, utilizing Iraqi cultural references and social norms. The findings of the abovementioned Tech4Peace survey indicate that programs aimed at identifying disinformation and increasing awareness result in a more educated audience that is conscious of the source and intent of the information they consume. It is important that such work continues to be carried out in collaboration with international partners for support, mentorship and legitimacy.

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Emerging organizations should work collaboratively with each other, as well as with other parts of society such as prominent and competent lawyers, in addition to reform-oriented civil servants. Such efforts also need to engage with civil society and independent media in order maximize messaging and reach. Independent media can include messages that are carefully created to raise awareness and challenge information disorder. Certain segments of the Ahmed al-Basheer and Ahmed Waheed shows, which are widely watched across the Middle East and within diaspora communities, have successfully shown how this can be done. Such shows raise important social and political issues in a way that is easily understandable by people and spreads quickly. For example, Ahmed Al-Basheer's show contained a segment that utilizes research and investigative journalism to refute misinformation spread by political elites through their electoral campaigns.[78]

Platforms such as META and Twitter can play a crucial role in stopping information disorder especially by stopping big accounts that spread disinformation. Partnerships with institutions that know the local context are crucial to strengthening work being done on this front and pushing for a crackdown on disinformation. Those platforms can increase their budgets on combating mis- and disinformation in Arabic and should invest in regional experts/human monitors, while finding ways to incorporate different dialects of the Arabic language into their algorithms.

Lastly, more emphasis needs to be put on the gendered aspect of information disorder and understanding the way that it affects marginalized groups, including individuals who identify as LGBTQI+. Anyone can fall victim to misinformation and disinformation, however, women and people from the LGBTQI+ community can be more vulnerable especially within the highly patriarchal context of Iraq. Furthermore, some social media pages prefer to attack women and people from other marginalized groups due to their vulnerability and the speed at which information about them can spread. Hence, any approach taken to counter information disorder must take specific steps to ensure that members of vulnerable communities are protected.

78   See more: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ7h8SKb8Kc

Annex 1

PROJECT NAME	DONOR	IMPLEMENTING PARTNER
Sonar - سونار	International Republican Institute	Nabil Jasim/ Iraqi Journalist - Team of volunteers
The Checker - الفاحص	International Republican Institute	Iraq Network of Social Media (INSM)
Bahwish - بحوش	International Republican Institute	Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights (IOHR)
Saheeh Iraq - صحيح عراق	German Development Agency	Saheeh Masr
Media Meter	International Republican Institute / National Endowment for Democracy	Tawasoul Org. - منظمة تواصل لتمكين الشباب
Point Conference-Iraq	The Station Foundation for Entrepreneurship	Point Conference-Iraq
IPEA	International Republican Institute	Tech4Peace
GISR-MENA	MSI	Tech4Peace
iSRAR	The International Foundation for Electoral Systems	Tech4Peace
Promoting online Media Accuracy and Accountability	National Endowment for Democracy	Tech4Peace
Rooted in Trust	Internews	Tech4Peace
Strengthening Women's Political Participation in Iraq	United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI)	Iraq Foundation
Human Rights Defenders Protection Project	European Union	Al-Amal Association
Democracy Promotion Project	Norwegian People's Aid	Al-Amal Association
Tech4Peace - IN2	IN2	Tech4Peace
DMAPS	British Council	Tech4Peace
Rapid Response Campaign	Purpose	Tech4Peace
Think Before Fake It 2!	Chemonics	Tech4Peace
Combating Misinformation Online in Iraq	United Nations Development Program	Tech4Peace

IFCT	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	Iraqi Media and Communications Commission CMC
Fake News in Iraq	Institute for War and Peace Reporting	
Training workshop on medical journalism	World Health Organization	Ministry of Health
Building Resilience of Youth and Communities Against Violent Extremism and Radicalization Project (BRYC)	Ministry of Foreign Affairs – The Netherlands	Iraq Foundation
Capacity building in the field of digital security and combating electronic rumors.	US Embassy in Iraq	Tech4Peace
Trainers for Media Literacy II	Media in Cooperation and Transition	Tech4Peace
MUSAWAT	PAX for Peace	Tech4Peace