


Chapter 3

Crises Determine Preference and Media Credibility: Case Study of Mass Protest in Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how university students in Iraq perceive credibility and their media preferences during the protests. The research found that the students' political views influenced their choices and perceptions, leading them to shift from traditional media like television, radio, and newspapers to social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook used by the protesters. The study used Cede Gaziano and Kristin McGrath's credibility analysis factors, which include importance, fairness, bias, accuracy, completeness, and trust, to survey a sample of Iraqi undergraduate students before and after the protests. The results showed a significant change in students' perceptions of credibility and their reliance on traditional media versus social media after the start of the protests.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2019, Pictures, and videos of protesters at Tahrir Square, which is situated in the center of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, went viral on social media during the first two days of the protest movement. This protesting movement called Tishreen uprising. The hashtag “#I_came_taking_my_right” (I want my rights) was launched to garner support for the protests. Muhannad Al-Ghazi, a journalist, and the editor-in-chief of a local news agency revealed that during the first two days of the demonstrations, television channels barely covered the events. Only three stations were interested in airing breaking news and some pictures of the demonstration squares. Meanwhile, the TV channels that were affiliated with the government such as the Iraqi Media Network and the religious party TV channels, did not show any interest in covering the protests Odeh. (2019).

The Iraqi government began controlling Facebook, and the Iraqi protesters secretly downloaded virtual private network (VPN) applications (a virtual network that allows communication with servers outside the country). Others began to publish details about the upcoming demonstrations. The Tahrir

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Square protests showed that social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, provided new sources of information that the political regime could not easily manage. These were crucial in convincing citizens to participate in the demonstrations. (Arraf & Lonsdorf, 2020). The massive protests occurred in early October 2019, when protesters massed in Baghdad's streets and cities in southern Iraq to demand the government's ouster, an end to corruption, and a halt to the overwhelming influence of Iran. The Iraqi government sent 70% of the country offline, unable to access the internet. Internet freedom monitor Netblocks blocked social media, including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, to quell protests sweeping through significant cities (Bostock, 2019). However, the traditional press, which consists of newspapers, radio, and television, continued to broadcast news.

Most traditional media in Iraq receives private funding from “parties, political and religious institutions, state officials, and businessmen, in addition to foreign entities that come from Arab, regional, or neighboring states, such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia” (Salim, 2021). Ownership of current media is either public, private, or partisan. The government owns and finances the public press. Partisan channels compete for space. For example, Sunni and Shi'ite stations compete over viewers. Kurdistan runs several Kurdish channels (Salim, 2021).

The Journalistic Freedoms Observatory in Iraq (JFOI) conducted a study in 2016 that explored the impact of financial uncertainty on journalism's independence in Iraq. In Iraq, media freedom has been declining (Awad, and Eaton, 2013). The JFOI study found that more than 50 local media organizations, including TV and radio stations, daily print publications, and news websites, received funding from unknown sources. Several local media institutions also received technical and financial support from political movements (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 2008).

A few crises may have motivated the Tishreen uprising. Iraqis had spent weeks peacefully protesting unemployment and a lack of job opportunities outside some of Baghdad's government buildings. Then, in late September, a video of demonstrators being dispersed by water cannons drew much attention to the government's aggressive tactics (D.L.B., DSA's, 2021). Anti-government protests, therefore, erupted in Iraq when Iraqi citizens vented their anger at the endemic corruption, high unemployment, limited public services, and foreign interference. The youth-dominated demonstrations called for an overhaul of the country's corrupt political system, in addition to changes that addressed the influence of Iran in Iraq's politics, measures to address high unemployment, particularly among the country's younger generations, where it stood at 25%, and improvements to public services (Tung, 2020). Additionally, more than 450 people were killed after these protests (Idris, 2020).

Protesters used social media to document the demonstrations, which prompted the Iraqi government to shut down the Internet for hours every day to prevent the events surrounding the protests among Iraqis and the international community (Lovotti, and Proserpio, 2021).

The research in this study surveyed Iraqi college students' perceptions about the media credibility and preferences of social and traditional media sources before and after the uprising. It measured any significant differences in media perceptions by students in Iraq by using a survey that treated credibility as a multidimensional concept and looked at gender differences in their perceptions and their political attitudes.

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