

MAPPING FALSE INFORMATION IN IRAQI ELECTIONS

Noor Omer | June 1, 2024

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Executive summary

The issue of information pollution clouding over Iraqi elections is an open and uncontested front. Political and religious parties weaponize online platforms to disseminate fake news targeting the already shredded social fabric and fragile trust system among the Iraqi populace. Public opinion and media influence and the relationship between the public and the political parties have become increasingly dysfunctional during elections, which has accelerated the dissemination of false information in many folds. The major argument stresses the significant role of Iraqi media in relation to information weaponization, its agents, and the strategic gains exploited throughout election campaigns. Given the importance of citizens exercising their right to vote, it is vital to assess the social function of Iraqi media in providing accurate and reliable information. By placing a strong emphasis on and fostering collaboration among the government, media organizations, and civil society, these various stakeholders can effectively address the challenge of information pollution and develop strategies to mitigate its impact.

The intense political dynamics in Iraqi elections has shifted to digital frontlines. Major political, religious parties deploy online tactics, utilizing platforms like Facebook and X- formerly Twitter, to spread fake news and engage in mudslinging election campaigns. Iraq is facing an incisive challenge as false information spreads quickly, affecting the dynamics of elections. The relationship between media influence and public opinion is significantly impacted by the polluted information environment in Iraq. The obsolete state-run media from the 70s era has been replaced by numerous outlets with political agendas, perpetuating the spread of false information during election campaigns. Understanding the potential weaponization of information as a source of power in Iraq requires uncovering the effect of the media on elections in relation to public opinion. It is critical to understand media attitude and responsibility in Iraqi elections and how its content contributions might be used as a weapon throughout the electoral processes to amass political capital.

The Role of Information in Citizen Voting

The notion of information is of considerable importance to all fields of information science and has been defined in many ways for decades. The term “information” originates from the Latin word *informare*, where “in” and “*formare*” together mean “to impart form, shape, or character to something.”¹ **Information is an important commodity during elections that can be utilized to strategically target certain voters.** Voters who actively seek credible sources of information tend to critically analyze news and media content to make well-informed decisions on current events.² When information is embedded in a culture that prioritizes accuracy, neutrality, and clarity, its true power comes to light.

Distinguishing between fact and fake sources of information is also a crucial skill that can substantially alter the trajectory of an election. When it comes to Iraq, the value of credible information is significantly compromised, with the media playing a central role in maintaining this compromise. It falls within the purview and responsibility of media outlets³ to meticulously determine the nature, purpose, and accuracy of the information transmitted. Upholding these principles is important in preserving the democratic integrity of elections. Unfortunately, Iraqi media often blatantly transgress these principles and instead employ a variety of tactics to weaponize information.

Information Weaponization

Information weaponization refers to the strategic utilization of information as a tool or weapon to achieve specific goals, including the deliberate spread of false or deceptive information, propaganda, and other tactics aimed at influencing perceptions and behaviors.⁴ Weaponized information includes content that fits one or more of the following criteria:⁵

- Deliberately falsified or misleading

- Created to influence opinions, behavior, or perceptions of truth
- Tailored to mislead specific populations
- Potentially categorized as propaganda, fake news, satire, a conspiracy theory, etc.
- Disseminated primarily through social media and niche websites
- Involves automated sharing by botnets and the fabrication of comments/sources to enhance apparent popularity and legitimacy
- Crafted either to promote a specific agenda or to exploit existing divisions for monetary gain

The different facets of weaponized information are further narrowed down in *the Council of Europe's White Paper*⁶ on Information Disorder⁷ where false information is classified into three categories, including:

Types of False Information	Definition
Misinformation	<u>Unintended or accidental mistakes</u> such as inaccurate captions, dates, statistics, translations, or satirical contents are taken seriously by the consumers of information.
Disinformation	<u>Fabricated or intentionally manipulated</u> and construed contents and messages, including purposely created conspiracy theories or rumors. This false information is deliberately and maliciously created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country.
Malinformation	<u>Deliberate publication of private information</u> for personal or private interest, as well as the deliberate manipulation of genuine content. <u>This is not false information</u> but instead, is real information based on reality, but is used and disseminated to harm others.

Table 1: Types of false or misleading information

Iraqi Media and Social Responsibility

The advent of the Internet has had a significant impact on the media industry, providing consumers with a wide range of options for accessing information and news. Gone are the days of exclusive state control over the media. Now, media outlets consistently deliver real-time news while accountable for upholding their social responsibility to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information necessary for active participation in a free society.⁸ Media's social responsibility showcased in Table 2, known as *the vital information premise*⁹, is a foundational principle in journalism ethics. In Iraq's media climate, evaluating characteristics of reliable journalism in the media industry is a crucial aspect in determining whether information is created, produced, and distributed ethically.

Principle	Main Point	Example
Present news stories that inform and serve the needs of citizens	Ethical news reporting prioritizes informing citizens accurately for democratic participation.	A news story that reports on the results of an election, the policies of the candidates, and the implications for the public.
Present issues fairly	Fair reporting requires factual accuracy and avoiding favoritism toward any organization or ideology.	A news story that covers controversial issues, such as job opportunity, and presents arguments and evidence from all sides, without bias or distortion.
Present stories in a way that addresses their complexity	News stories often involve complex issues, requiring thorough investigation.	A news story that explores the causes and consequences of a regional problem, such as climate change or poverty, and provides context and background information.
Present diverse perspectives	Diversity in journalism, both in newsroom and perspectives, is	A news story that features the voices and experiences of people from different

	fundamental for democratic participation.	backgrounds, cultures, genders, and identities, and reflects their views and concerns.
Monitor government and corporations	The media, acting as a watchdog, ensures transparency and accountability in government and corporations.	A news story that exposes corruption, fraud, or abuse of power by public officials or business leaders and holds them accountable for their actions.

Table 2: Ethical news reporting principles by the Committee of Concerned Journalists¹⁰.

Even though these ethical standards can provide important guidance for Iraqi media, it is difficult to assess how effectively the Iraqi media adheres to these principles in its news coverage. A large portion of the media is linked to political and/or religious groups. As a result, these outlets tend to be influenced by the political and religious agendas of those affiliations, such as press, television, radio, as well as online and offline news agencies.¹¹ When political and religious groups wield influence over the media, exercising control over information and media’s weaponization are inevitable. Thus, the news broadcasted via these channels and their affiliated social media is structured to run a vicious political campaign. Their primary goal is to deliberately sow mistrust by manipulating the data that voters rely on. As a result, the Iraqi electoral system is primarily confronted with challenges of information pollution,¹² or “infollution“ as well as infodemic¹³ posing a substantial threat to the overall success of the electoral process. An infodemic may happen when a proliferation of inaccurate or deceptive information regarding candidates or political matters ensues, thereby impeding voters' ability to make well-informed decisions regarding voting procedures and requirements.¹⁴ In both cases, the media deploys attention theft strategies to increase viewership and public engagement.

Information Pollution (infollution)	Infodemic
A considerable amount of unverified and unauthenticated information that are irrelevant, redundant, unsolicited, and low-value information.	Excessive volume of information, both true and false, making it difficult for people to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information

Propaganda, Character Assassination, and Malinformation

News bias and censorship are two of the most prominent forms of media propaganda. In some instances, a plethora of fake accounts and pages claim to be that of politicians or media organizations orchestrate targeted attacks. Political parties use media propaganda to affect public opinion in favor of a certain candidate or party by spreading false information. Alternatively, they take part in harsh defamation campaigns directed at the rival political party candidates that aim to destroy their reputations and thus kick them out of the competition. This process is called character assassination and was initially introduced by Jerome Davis, American activist and sociologist, in 1950 in his compilation of essays, where he illuminated the risks associated with political smear campaigns.¹⁵ Media outlets funded by external sources are also weaponized to propagate propaganda, thereby establishing dominance in the information sphere. The main tools of media propaganda rely on online sources, such as channels and social media platforms. For instance, Iraqi journalist Suadad Al-Salhy and The Telegraph's reporter Wil Crisp revealed that political entities in Iraq were investing millions of dollars in Facebook to drive traffic towards disinformation content in 2020¹⁶. One of the most common phenomena is gender-specific character assassination. In the 2018 national election in Iraq, Dr. Intidhar Jassim, associated with the Victory Alliance led by former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, had to withdraw her candidacy after a fabricated sex tape surfaced online. Dr. Jassim vehemently accused members of rival parties of

orchestrating the creation and dissemination of the false content.¹⁷ Furthermore, malinformation has been purposefully used to undermine the fundamentals of Iraq's voting systems. In September 2022, amid uncertainties about the Sadrists' future actions, malinformation circulated on social media, depicting the Sadrist movement as violent and disruptive to the political process. While these posts implied premeditated planning by the Sadrists, the reality was that the attacks on the Green Zone were more spontaneous, with many Sadrists participating without clear direction or explicit interference.¹⁸

What of Public Opinion?

In Iraq, media content is influenced by various factors that align with the preferences of the public. Different media outlets may have various approaches when aligning with public opinion to maintain their popularity and credibility. Additionally, some outlets might be influenced by political or ideological factors, which can impact the content they produce, sometimes independently of public preferences. However, it is common for media outlets to strive to accommodate and mirror the preferences, concerns, and interests of their audience, including their perspectives on political candidates and issues, particularly during elections. In a democratic setting, it is important for individuals to carefully examine and evaluate contentious political issues and the narratives put forth by political parties during election campaigns. However, this is not the situation in Iraq. At most, voters will have to return to the existing media that supports one of the political parties participating in the elections. In such circumstances, it is exceedingly difficult to even be considered an engaged voter, as the prevalence of information control and censorship hinders the development of an electoral culture that values informing voters.

Nonetheless, the Iraqi voters also fail to adopt a strong sense of electoral awareness. Part of this is due to a hereditary misconception around the concept of citizenship among Iraqis.

Understanding the fact that democracies are more than just voting, and elections is central to citizenship. The bedrock of a well-functioning democracy is a democratic political culture.¹⁹ A democratic political culture should align with the principles of civic rights and responsibilities. The problem is Iraqis have a limited understanding of the responsibilities that come with exercising their civic rights, such as voting. This underlies the central debate among the Iraqis: Whether they have a say in decisions made in the country. There is no question that public opinion in Iraq is negative in this regard. But there is a reason why most Iraqis believe they cannot influence government policies through their ballots. The media, as well as the Iraqi people, have failed to address this long-standing public perception centered on the effectiveness of elections. The degree to which the Iraqi populace is exposed to false information is among the most influential factors in shaping public opinion. There is, nevertheless, the possibility that public opinion itself could dominate media content. Put simply, the media and public opinion both contribute to the dissemination of false information interchangeably.

The influence of public opinion on media content is often hidden but significant. This influence is exerted through various ways, such as consumption patterns, engagement with news, and responses to/and distribution of information. The Iraqi people, in some instances, are primarily drawn to negative news, and specifically enjoy defamation stories during election campaigns. In Iraq, the number of social media users who spread false information and smear others far outnumbers those who work to discredit them. Under different circumstances, the Iraqi population tends to question the effectiveness of elections in bringing about improved governance, rather than actively advocating for fair, free, and transparent elections. Although their distrust might be justified to some degree, it cannot be ignored that Iraqis do not particularly work to produce free, fair, and transparent elections as part of their ideal. Following this, statistics indicate that more than sixty percent of the

Iraqi population believes they do not have the capacity to influence government decisions in Iraq as depicted in Figure 1. Notably, the combined percentage among Sunni, Kurd, and Shiaa populations for both 2020 and 2021 does not reach fifty percent of the total population.

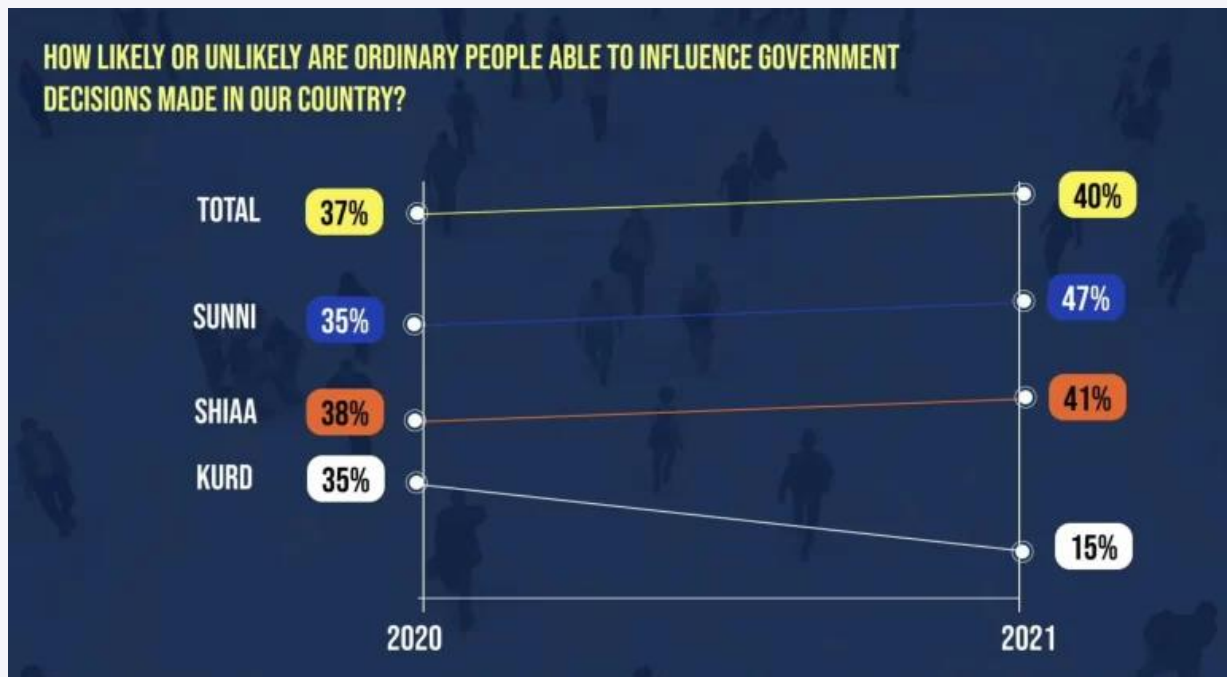


Figure 1: The Iraqi Opinion Thermometer (IOT) poll conducted in April 2021 aims to determine whether the state of public opinion in the country is conducive to a sustainable and well-functioning pluralistic democracy.

Coping with the Pitfalls of False Information

Role of Government Oversight Corrected

One crucial role of governments in overseeing media content is to address false information campaigns during elections. This includes actively monitoring the scope of false news and deploying strategies to counter and neutralize its impact. For instance, in the Czech Republic, authorities directly oversaw the tracking of false information. In preparation for the country's general election in 2017, the Czech government established a "specialized analytical and communications unit" within the Ministry of Interior. As part of its mandate to monitor internal security threats, this unit specifically focused on countering "disinformation campaigns" to

assess whether the scale of disinformation seriously affects the internal security of elections in the country.²⁰ However, the Ministry of Interior was responsible for implementing these measures, as they were specifically designed to counter national security threats on elections in the Czech Republic. On a different level, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior have created a specific mandate to monitor information flow during election campaigns. This specific mandate is implemented via the "Surveillance Service" Facebook page of the Ministry which is mainly focused on tracking and debunking fake news.²¹ Regardless of the effectiveness of the Ministry's mandate, its engagement in the process compromises the whole purpose of fair, transparent elections. Public opinion is much more responsive when governments are not involved in matters that concern election and voting. Plus, it is quite unmanageable to counteract false news when only 34, 000 Iraqis are followers of the Surveillance Service Facebook page²² out of 25.53 million social media users in the country as of January 2023.²³ The Iraqi government could employ much more effective, and accurate measures tailored to achieving its intended objectives. One way to do that is to adopt the recommendations by the Council of Europe's *White Paper*,²⁴ for governments to effectively direct efforts to:

- Commission research to map information disorder
- Regulate ad networks
- Require transparency around Facebook ads
- Support public service media organizations and local news outlets
- Roll out advanced cybersecurity training
- Enforce minimum levels of public service news on to the platforms

Role of Media Organizations and Civil Society

Media organizations and civil society are important players during elections, and they should be encouraged to understand the *ritualistic function of communication*. In other words, rather than simply think about communication as the transmission of information from one person to another, [they] must recognize that communication plays a fundamental role in representing shared beliefs, as scholar James Carey argues in his essay on “Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society.”²⁵ To cope with the pitfalls of information disorder, media organizations and civil society should aim at the following:

Media Organizations :

- Collaborate
- Agree policies on strategic silence
- Ensure strong ethical standards across all media
- Debunk sources as well as content
- Produce more news literacy segments and features
- Focus on improving the quality of headlines
- Do not disseminate fabricated content

Civil Society :

- Educate the public about the threat of information disorder
- Act as honest brokers

Conclusion

The toxic surge of information pollution, amplified through online content and sources, poses a formidable challenge to the Iraqi electoral system. Government, media, and civil society must collaborate as the electoral battlefield moves online. To preserve electoral integrity, media should unify, educate, and promote responsible reporting and coverage. On

the other hand, government supervision must be dynamic to counteract electoral information disorder. A durable and healthy political process in Iraq depends on countering false information campaigns, instrumental in succeeding the overall electoral process in the country.

Endnotes

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CONTACT

CHANNEL8 BUILDING,
KURDSAT QTR , AS SULAYMANIYAH, IRAQ
+964 (0)770-608-8885
INNOV8@CHANNEL8.MEDIA