

Iraqi public opinion on the Web: An exploratory study of opinions on invasion and election

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an exploratory study of a selection of user contributions to a news feedback forum on the Web provided by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service to its Arab listeners. Contributions representing Iraqi public opinion on a variety of topics covering Iraq under occupation were categorized and analyzed to provide a glimpse of how access to the Web has allowed Iraqis to freely express their opinions, and of how Iraqi public opinion manifests itself throughout these contributions. The results provided insights into the feelings of Iraqis towards the invasion and occupation of their country, and they highlighted the role played by the Web as a vital communication vehicle for public opinion and political debates.

Keywords: Public opinion, Web discussion forums, Iraq.

INTRODUCTION

The American invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq have changed the political and military environment of one of the world's hottest spots—the Middle East. The United States' decision to invade Iraq and topple the Iraqi government has created new balances of power in the region and radically changed the political landscape of Iraq and its position among its neighbors. After decades under one-party rule, the Iraqis found themselves, almost overnight, struggling to understand and cope with overwhelming changes that were brought about by the collapse of the government and by the introduction of new concepts of political freedom and governance. Opportunities and ideas that had been unheard of prior to the occupation have become popular topics of discussion, generating

debates and new perceptions of internal politics and of relations with Iraq's neighbors.

One of the most indicative signs of change in the political mood of the Iraqis is the exponential increase in the use of the Web to advance political agendas and express political opinions. In the aftermath of the invasion and the regime change, Iraqis have been eager to use the Web to express their opinions and to participate in discussions on their country's past, present, and future—there has been no shortage of issues. The fast pace of developments and the never-ending succession of political and military events have been the most pressing sources of concern in Iraq, and they have provided a fertile ground for debates among Iraqis and among the observers of Iraqi affairs.

The future of the Iraq and its place in the international community depends largely on how the Iraqis themselves envision their country's new role. It also consequently depends on a clear understanding on the part of policymakers, in countries involved in Iraq, of Iraqi public opinion. Public opinion play a big role in policymaking processes followed by democratically elected governments, and it has always been one venue for citizens to participate in the political process. In Iraq, the importance of public opinion is even greater, as it virtually did not exist for more than four decades before 2003. In the midst of conflicting media reports, newswire stories, and political analyses, it is crucial to understand how ordinary Iraqis view the developments in their country and how they have reacted to events that changed and are still changing their lives.

Since the early days of the occupation, many Iraqis have taken advantage of the newly established Internet access to tell the world what they think about the events in their country. Popular venues on

the Web have been news feedback forums, where users are provided with platforms to voice off their opinions on current events and news stories. Iraqi public opinion as expressed on these forums, offers a glimpse of how the participants have been reacting to events in their country and of how they have viewed the occupation and its impact on their lives.

This study relies on an analysis and a presentation of discussions of Iraqi topics on a news feedback forum on the Arabic Website of the BBC World Service. These topics range from the developments of the first days of the invasion and occupation to the election, including other topics such as the insurgency, the meddling of neighbouring countries, and the kidnapping of foreigners.

Much has been reported in the media on how Iraqis have dealt with the occupation of their country and how they view the occupiers and the insurgency. However, news feedback forums such as the BBC forum provide different perspectives on events and allow their users to express their opinions freely. These opinions can be used to gauge directions and changes in public opinion, and they might provide policymakers with invaluable information that is not affected by political bias and media manipulation.

How should policy makers interpret and analyze opinions expressed on news feedback forums is not a concern of this paper. Instead, the paper seeks to provide an illustrative example of the opinions expressed by Iraqi contributors to the BBC Arabic forum, and to provide the readers with the opportunity to see and judge for themselves how such forums have allowed Iraqi public opinion to evolve and manifest itself on the Web.

METHOD

The BBC news feedback forum allows its users to post their opinions on topics suggested by the staff of the BBC Arabic World Service. These topics are usually related to current events and to issues of interest to Arab audiences; Iraq has been a popular and pressing topic of discussion that has been given its fair share of space on the BBC forum. Starting with the months leading to the March 2003 invasion, there has been an average of five topics per month posted for discussion and comments. Most of these topics focused on the repercussions of the occupation and its effects on Iraq and its neighbors, leading to the January 2005 election.

A sample of 10 discussion topics, covering 2003, 2004, and the first two months of 2005, was selected as the basis for this paper. Contributions to these topics came from Arab users living in Arab countries and, in few instances, in North America or Europe. For each of the 10 topics, contributions by Iraqis living in Iraq or abroad were saved, counted, and analyzed to identify two differing themes (Theme A and Theme B). Contributions that were categorized under “Theme A” represented opinions parallel to the policies and strategies adopted by the occupiers and their allies in Iraq; those categorized under “Theme B” represented opposing views. Out of the contributions to each topic, one from each theme was translated as an illustrative example. Contributions that represented unclear views were categorized under “No theme”.

RESULTS

The background information on each topic, as provided in Arabic by the BBC, is presented in its translated form. Then, the two differing themes are presented to facilitate the reading of the table that contains the data collected on each topic. The first row in each table lists the number of contributions categorized under “Theme A”; the second row lists the number of contributions categorized under “Theme B”; the third row lists the number of contributions that were not categorized under any theme; and the fourth row lists the total number of contributions by Iraqis to the discussion of the topic. Below each table are listed two translated sample contributions—one from each theme.

1. The coalition forces and winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqis [1]

Background: Observers have pointed out the importance of gaining the cooperation and sympathy of the Iraqi people, especially in the coming months. Do you think the coalition forces will in the end be able to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis, and how?

Theme A: Contributors tend to believe that the coalition forces will eventually earn the trust of the Iraqis.

Theme B: They should not even try, as they will never be accepted by the Iraqi people. The Americans

Table 1

Theme A	16
Theme B	1
No theme	1
Total	18

Theme A sample contribution: “I believe the Americans can win the hearts and minds of Iraqis, especially because they came here to liberate the Iraqi people from the old regime.”

Theme B sample contribution: “It is hypocritical of the US to claim that it came to liberate the Iraqis. Iraq was and still is a graveyard for the invaders.”

2. Developments in Iraq [2]

Background: The transitional government plans to establish a security force that includes members of the parties represented in the Transitional Council. This force is expected to number around 1000 armed men and to participate with the Americans in security missions to track and arrest insurgents. All potential members of the force will be subject to background checks aimed at excluding former Ba’ath party members. Do you think this force will contribute to establishing law and order, or it will further deepen political divisions?

Theme A: This is a great idea, as Iraqis should participate in restoring order in their country.

Theme B: Iraqis should not help the occupiers.

Table 2

Theme A	10
Theme B	4
No theme	0
Total	14

Theme A sample contribution: “This force will help in restoring order. The police force has succeeded in lowering the crime rate and in arresting criminals released by the former regime. The new force will focus on chasing the terrorists.”

Theme B sample contribution: “We don not want to return to the days of the militias.”

3. Bush’s appeals to the Arab world [3]

Background: In an interview with *Hurriya* TV station, President Bush insisted that those responsible for prisoner abuse in Iraq will be punished. Bush had apologized publicly for the abuse during a joint press conference with King Abdullah of Jordan in Washington. What are your comments on Bush’s remarks, and do you think they will have a positive effect?

Theme A: President Bush is the leader of a democratic country and his apology should be accepted.

Theme B: No matter what Bush says, the damage has been done.

Table 3

Theme A	15
Theme B	2
No theme	0
Total	17

Theme A sample contribution: “Why did the pictures appear at this time? There are people who want Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair to fall before fulfilling their promises to Iraq.”

Theme B sample contribution: “The American president wants us to accept the justification of what happened. He forgot that he did not accept an apology for what happened to the Americans in Fallujah.”

4. Reactions to prisoner abuse and the beheading of an American hostage [4]

Background: The world was shocked by the pictures of prisoner abuse in Iraq and by the beheading of the American hostage Nicholas Berg. The Arab reactions to the two stories were remarkably different. While the prisoner abuse caused an angry reaction in the Arab world and was heavily covered in Arabic newspapers, the reaction to the beheading of the American hostage was not as pronounced and most newspapers did not give it prominent coverage. The reaction of Arab governments to both stories was all but not existent. How do you explain the difference?

Theme A: It is barbaric to behead innocent civilians, and the prisoner abuse cannot be compared to it.

Theme B: Violence leads to violence.

Table 4

Theme A	5
Theme B	1
No theme	1
Total	7

Theme A sample contribution: “Arab prisons are full of much worse stories. Before criticizing the Americans, the Arabs should first clean their act.”

Theme B sample contribution: “The Arabs should stand with the Muslim world.”

5. Prisoner abuse trials [5]

Background: One American soldier was convicted for his role in the prisoner abuse case, sentenced for one year in jail, demoted, and discharged from the army. Six other American soldiers are facing different charges, ranging from assault to subjecting prisoners to humiliating sexual acts. Do you think the trials will help in dissipating the anger over the prisoner abuse scandal in Abu Ghraib, and do you agree that these trials should also bring to light the issue of torture in all Arab countries, not just in Iraq?

Theme A: The Americans are doing the right thing by proving to the Arab world that people are held accountable for their actions.

Theme B: These are nothing but farcical trials.

Table 5

Theme A	21
Theme B	6
No theme	0
Total	27

Theme A sample contribution: “Yes, I believe these trials will calm the Iraqis.”

Theme B sample contribution: “I want to ask first if raping girls and minors in front of their parents is not a serious crime under their law.”

6. The new Iraqi government [6]

Background: The special UN envoy to Iraq announced that Alyawar had been selected as the president of Iraq. The Governing Council had selected a week earlier Allawi as the prime minister. The Iraqi president will participate in installing a provisional government until the election is held in 2005. Do you think that the provisional government will guide Iraq toward establishing a democratic society, and do you think that the era of dictatorship and power monopoly has ended in Iraq?

Theme A: This is the best thing that could happen to Iraq before we can have an elected government.

Theme B: This type of government is not democratic.

Table 6

Theme A	31
Theme B	5
No theme	3
Total	39

Theme A sample contribution: “We, Iraqis, are very happy because of these political changes, and we are upset by the interference of some countries.”

Theme B sample contribution: “This government does not represent the Iraqi people.”

7. Fallujah [7]

Background: American commanders said that American and Iraqi forces conducting operations in Fallujah have found large stockpiles of weapons and ammunition. Earlier, the Americans had declared Fallujah under full control.

Theme A: The insurgents in Fallujah should have been defeated a long time ago.

Theme B: The Iraqis should not have participated in fighting against their own people.

Table 7

Theme A	62
Theme B	20
No theme	15
Total	97

Theme A sample contribution: “Fallujah has become a safe haven for terror and crime against Iraqis.”

Theme B sample contribution: “Innocent children, elderly, and women are killed in the name of fighting terrorism.”

8. Some Iraqi regions are excluded from the election [8]

Background: Prime Minister Allawi said that some regions in Iraq will not participate in the election scheduled for January 30, 2005. However, he insisted that these regions are not big. What is your opinion on the insistence of the Iraqi government on holding the election on time, with the exception of some regions, to ensure the continuity of the political process in Iraq?

Theme A: Under the current situation, it is fine to exclude some areas from the election process. It is better to hold the election in parts of Iraq instead of not holding it at all.

Theme B: How can the government claim a free election when it does not allow a large segment of the population to vote?

Table 8

Theme A	71
Theme B	7
No theme	10
Total	88

Theme A sample contribution: “People who do not want to participate in the election do not have the right to criticize who is going to win it.”

Theme B sample contribution: “Any election that does not cover all parts of Iraq is unfair, unjust, and illegal.”

9. Preparations for the election [9]

Background: The American ambassador to Iraq, John Negroponte, predicted overwhelming successes for the Shi’is, Kurds, and secular parties in the election to be held on January 30, 2005. The ambassador confirmed that the Sunni minority will have another chance to vote later this year, when a

referendum on the permanent constitution will be held.

Theme A: All Iraqis should participate in the election to make their voices heard and show the world their progress towards democracy.

Theme B: The election is a tool in the hands of the occupiers to divide Iraq and extend their stay in it.

Table 9

Theme A	34
Theme B	2
No theme	0
Total	36

Theme A sample contribution: “We call upon all forces of good and freedom to help us for the sake of Iraq. The people will prevail.”

Theme B sample contribution: “This election will bring to power a government worse than the former regime.”

10. Election results and future challenges [10]

Background: Prime Minister Allawi declared that he will form a new opposition coalition to the United Iraqi Alliance, which won 140 seats out of 275 Parliament seats. Allawi’s declaration came one day after the United Iraqi Alliance nominated its candidate to head the new government.

Theme A: The election results constitute a big victory for the Iraqi people. The voters showed their commitment to democratic and free Iraq. Iraqis should be proud to have demonstrated to the world that they are freedom seekers who just want to see their country join its rightful place among the nations of the world.

Theme B: The election results will cause sectarian strife and destroy the country for the benefit of the occupiers.

Table 10

Theme A	75
Theme B	5
No theme	1
Total	81

Theme A sample contribution: “The participation of the majority of Iraqis in the election is a message to all Arab rulers and other rulers in the region. They should be worried because they inherited their positions or they got them by force.”

Theme B sample contribution: “Is it possible that the occupiers spent billions of dollars and lost many of their soldiers to help the Iraqi people choose their representatives? If the answer is yes, let their freedom and democracy be cursed for ever.”

CONCLUSION

News feedback forums on the Web are a growing source of information for policymakers and researchers alike. By presenting the opinions expressed by Iraqis on the Arabic forum of the BBC, this paper goal has been to draw a picture of these opinions as a reflection of Iraqi public opinion and its transformation on the Web.

It is hoped that the data presented in this paper will form the genesis of further investigation into different aspects of Iraqi public opinion as expressed on the Web, and that they will spur interest in studying the role of news feedback forums as reliable information sources.

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*Page titles are translations of the Arabic originals.