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DISINFORMATION IN IRAQI MEDIA

Aida Al-Kaisy

LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series | 55 | October 2021

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About the Author

Aida Al-Kaisy is a media development consultant and academic researcher who has worked extensively on media projects across the MENA region, in particular in Iraq. She is currently working on projects which focus on issues related to the development of independent media, ethics of journalism in conflict and in countries where freedom of expression is challenged as well gender and human rights in the media. Aida is a keen promoter of ethical values in journalistic practice and media governance. Her PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, focused on journalistic practice and identity in Iraqi newsrooms.

Abstract

The rise of narratives of disinformation in the Iraqi public sphere is threatening to destabilise an already fragile political system. Discourse and narratives are being manipulated by powerful elites who are banking on declining trust in the government and official institutions to aid the spread of false information. Alternative voices and opinions, from activists to journalists and human rights defenders, are also being targeted through metanarratives which serve to discredit their actions and intentions. In the specific context of Iraq, where mainstream media lack the capacity and will for verification, these narratives – emerging on social media platforms – are now informing media content and debates.

This paper examines the key narratives of disinformation that are prevalent in Iraqi media. It provides an analysis of the messages, agents, intentions and impact of the spread of disinformation. Focusing particularly on the period during which planned national elections were postponed, it identifies narratives of disinformation which emerged during that time. I argue that, due to the overriding partisan and unprofessional conditions for the media and the challenging political context of Iraq, the lines between partisan information and disinformation have become blurred.

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CONFLICT RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Research at LSE

The Conflict Research Programme (CRP) is a three-year programme designed to address the drivers and dynamics of violent conflict in the Middle East and Africa, and to inform the measures being used to tackle armed conflict and its impacts. The programme focuses on Iraq, Syria, DRC, Somalia and South Sudan, as well as the wider Horn of Africa/Red Sea and Middle East regions.

The Middle East Centre is leading the research on drivers of conflict in Iraq and the wider Middle East. Our partners in Iraq are the Institute of Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, as well as Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, Al-Amal Association, Public Aid Organisation and Iraqi Women Network in Baghdad.

For more information about the Centre's work on the CRP, please contact Taif Alkhudary (t.alkhudary@lse.ac.uk).

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Executive Summary

The rise of narratives of disinformation in the Iraqi public sphere is threatening to destabilise an already fragile political system. Discourse and narratives are being manipulated by powerful elites who are banking on declining trust in the government and official institutions to aid the spread of false information. Alternative voices and opinions, from activists to journalists and human rights defenders, are also being targeted through metanarratives which serve to discredit their actions and intentions. In the specific context of Iraq, where mainstream media lack the capacity and will for verification, these narratives which are emerging on social media platforms are now informing media content and debates.

This paper will examine the key narratives of disinformation that are prevalent in Iraqi media. It will provide an analysis of the messages, agents, intentions and impact of the spread of disinformation. It will then focus particularly on the period during which planned national elections were postponed in order to identify narratives of disinformation which may have emerged during that time. It will argue that, due to the overriding partisan and unprofessional conditions for the media and the challenging political context of Iraq, the lines between partisan information and disinformation have become blurred.

Based on these findings, this paper makes the following recommendations:

Monitor and fact-check Iraq's information space. This should be conducted in the lead up to future Iraqi elections, local and national. This would not only highlight election-related disinformation but help to improve media standards in general. Projects such as the Stanford Election Partnership monitored mis- and disinformation in the US 2020 election, aiming to combat the spread of false narratives by sharing their findings with technology giants, media and policy-makers in real time.

Crack down on disinformation. Technology giants have a role to play in limiting disinformation by monitoring accounts which violate their platforms' policies. Government bodies, civil society organisations and the media should continue to engage Facebook, Twitter and Telegram and encourage them to fight disinformation. This approach has shown some success in the fight against COVID-19 mis-and disinformation as well as during the fight with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Support the growth and development of independent media. Without a more developed media landscape in Iraq, accountable to professional standards and the public, ethical practices regarding verification and accuracy will not be addressed. Wider media development interventions that focus on sourcing independent revenue streams, capacity-building for journalists and better governance structures in media houses are necessary for a long-term solution.

Co-ordinate with international initiatives. There are a number of global projects to combat disinformation. United efforts to combat disinformation on a wider basis will support efforts at the national level in Iraq. Iraqi stakeholders should engage with these projects – for example the United Nations 'Verified' initiative and organisations such as the Global Investigative Journalists Network and First Draft News – in order to ensure that the needs of Iraq are considered in emerging solutions.

الملخص التنفيذي

تهدد الزيادة في سرديات المعلومات المضللة في المجال العام العراقي بزعزعة استقرار النظام السياسي الهش أصلاً. يتم التلاعب بالخطاب والسرد من قبل النخب القوية التي تعتمد على تراجع الثقة في الحكومة والمؤسسات الرسمية للمساعدة في نشر المعلومات الزائفة. يتم أيضاً استهداف الأصوات والآراء البديلة، من النشطاء إلى الصحفيين والمدافعين عن حقوق الإنسان، من خلال سرديات كبرى تعمل على تشويه أفعالهم ونواياهم. في السياق الخاص بالعراق، حيث تفتقر وسائل الإعلام السائدة إلى القدرة والإرادة على التحقق، فإن هذه السرديات التي تظهر على منصات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي تعمل الآن على صوغ المحتوى الإعلامي والمناقشات.

ستدرس هذه الورقة السرديات الرئيسية للمعلومات المضللة السائدة في وسائل الإعلام العراقية. وستقدم تحليلاً للرسائل والعوامل والنوايا وتأثير انتشار المعلومات المضللة. وستركز بعد ذلك بشكل خاص على الفترة التي تم خلالها تأجيل الإنتخابات الوطنية المخطط لها من أجل تحديد سرديات المعلومات المضللة التي قد تكون ظهرت خلال تلك الفترة. ستجادل الورقة أنه بسبب هيمنة التحيز والظروف غير المهنية لوسائل الاعلام والسياق السياسي الصعب في العراق، أصبحت الخطوط الفاصلة بين المعلومات المتحيزة والمعلومات المضللة غير واضحة.

بناءً على هذه النتائج ، تقدم هذه الورقة التوصيات التالية:

مراقبة وتحري الحقائق في الفضاء المعلوماتي العراقي. يجب أن يتم ذلك في الفترة التي تسبق الإنتخابات العراقية في أكتوبر/تشرين الأول ٢٠٢١، إن تم المضي قدماً في الانتخابات. هذا لن يسلط الضوء على المعلومات المضللة المتعلقة بالانتخابات فحسب، بل سيساعد على تحسين معايير الإعلام بشكل عام. رصدت مشاريع مثل Stanford Election Partnership المعلومات الخاطئة والمضللة في إنتخابات الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية ٢٠٢٠، وبهدف مكافحة إنتشار الروايات الكاذبة قامت بمشاركة النتائج التي توصلت اليها مع عمالقة التكنولوجيا ووسائل الإعلام وصانعي السياسات بشكل فوري.

مكافحة المعلومات المضللة. يلعب عمالقة التكنولوجيا دوراً في الحد من المعلومات المضللة من خلال مراقبة الحسابات التي تنتهك سياسات منصاتهم. يجب على الهيئات الحكومية ومنظمات المجتمع المدني ووسائل الإعلام الدأب في التواصل مع فيسبوك وتويتر وتيلغرام وتشجيعهم على مكافحة المعلومات المضللة. أظهر هذا النهج بعض النجاح في الحرب ضد المعلومات المضللة والخاطئة عن COVID-١٩ وكذلك أثناء محاربة تنظيم الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام (داعش).

دعم توسع وتطور وسائل الإعلام المستقلة. فبدون مشهد إعلامي أكثر تطوراً في العراق، وخاضع للمساءلة أمام المعايير المهنية والجمهور، لن يتم التعامل مع الممارسات الأخلاقية المتعلقة بالتحقق والدقة. تعد تدخلات تطوير وسائل الإعلام الأوسع نطاقاً والتي تركز على توفير مصادر دخل مستقلة وبناء قدرات الصحفيين وأنظمة حوكمة أفضل في دور الإعلام، ضرورية لحل طويل الأمد.

التنسيق مع المبادرات الدولية. هناك عدد من المشاريع العالمية لمكافحة المعلومات المضللة. ستدعم الجهود الموحدة لمكافحة المعلومات المضللة على نطاق أوسع الجهود المبذولة على المستوى الوطني في العراق. يجب أن يشارك أصحاب المصلحة العراقيون في هذه المشاريع – على سبيل المثال مبادرة الأمم المتحدة «Verified» والمنظمات مثل شبكة الصحفيين الاستقصائيين العالمية و First Draft News – من أجل ضمان أن تؤخذ احتياجات العراق في الإعتبار في الحلول المستجدة.

Introduction

On Sunday 14 March 2021, the Secretary General of the paramilitary group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Qais al-Khazali, tweeted that he had received reliable information, without naming sources, that the Iraqi National Intelligence Service had moved 300 troops to its border on the orders of the UAE during a reported Emirati visit to the country.[1] In his tweet, Khazali described the situation as an anti-Iraqi conspiracy saying, 'Has Iraq reached a new level of weakness?'. The tweet was liked by nearly 3,000 people and shared by 1,000 people with 1,500 comments. On Monday 15 March, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service refuted the claims in a statement calling the claims 'harmful' and expressing regret that it needed to respond to such false claims. An MP from the Sadiqoun political bloc, the political wing of AAH, Hassan Salem, then demanded that Parliament question Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, former head of the National Intelligence Service, about the claim. Later that day, a lesser-known armed group, Ashab al-Kahf, posted a statement on their Telegram account which denounced the PM for his actions and threatened to intensify military action against foreign targets in Iraq. That night, Balad Air Base in Salahaddin province, which houses US forces, was hit by seven rockets according to local media. By Wednesday, Iraqi mainstream media platforms were covering the story. *Al Ahad* TV channel, affiliated with AAH, carried an interview with Kazem al-Sayadi, MP with the State of Law Coalition, who claimed that the UAE together with the US and Israel had plans to 'destabilise' Iraq.

Unverified claims such as this have become commonplace in Iraq and are increasingly threatening political processes and prospects for stability. The Iraqi public sphere is known less for its spaces for tolerant dialogue and debate, and more for its propensity to incite violence, threats and harassment. Social media accounts of politicians and influencers are ubiquitous and popular amongst citizens with the lack of any gatekeepers of content lessening any chance of 'factual accountability.'[2] The mainstream media landscape in Iraq is funded by actors with entrenched political agendas and aspirations for power and they have become the main disseminators of false news and information from social media in a bid to engage with audiences who are moving away from mainstream media consumption. Such dissemination is increasingly marked by overtly violent intentions to undermine the credibility of political actors and those who desire genuine change in Iraq's political status quo.

In October 2019, a national protest movement that began in 2011 became more unified with greater clarity in its demands. Ongoing protests increased significantly in numbers and demands for an end to corruption and fair political representation became more coherent, despite being met by violence from security services and armed groups. A principal demand of the protesters was the overhaul of the *muhasasa ta'ifia* system, the political quota-based system created in 2003 which allocates governance of public insti-

[1] Qais al-Khazali, Tweet, 14 March 2021. Available at: https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/1371152851809013763 (accessed 10 August 2021).

[2] Lucas Graves & Chris Wells, 'From Information Availability to Factual Accountability', in James E. Katz & Kate K. Mays (eds), *Journalism and Truth in an Age of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 39–57.

tutions and bodies on a sectarian basis. This system is considered to be one of the main causes behind the structural corruption associated with the Iraqi state and government. Adel Abdul Mahdi was eventually forced to resign as prime minister, to be replaced by the current PM al-Kadhimi. His appointment was, in part at least, intended to address some of the protestors' demands, which included holding fair and transparent national elections ahead of schedule in June 2021.

The protest movement, key activists within it and the al-Kadhimi government have all been subjected to campaigns of online harassment. These mainly consist of disinformation, which is spread as means of discrediting their statuses, once again undermining possibilities for meaningful change in Iraq. This report will examine the key narratives of disinformation in the Iraqi media, identifying some of the agents and motives behind the dissemination of those narratives. It will argue that competing narratives are being used by different rivals for power in Iraq as a means of silencing dissenting voices – activists and policy makers – in a bid to maintain the current system and limit the possibility for peaceful transition and change. However, it will show that in some situations, in this case the postponement of the national elections, there is a lack of clarity between information, used by political actors to contest the actions and motivations of their opponents, and disinformation. The unethical media environment is aggravating this situation further.

What is Disinformation?

Disinformation is a relatively new concept and as such a universally agreed definition is hard to come by. The Russian term *Dezinformatsiya* referred to a unit within the KGB whose purpose was to mislead opponents and shape public perceptions.[3] This word was then used in English during the Cold War in the 1980s to refer to Soviet attempts to gain influence by inserting misleading content in both Soviet and foreign media. By this point, networks of journalists were being employed by the Soviet Union to spread fabricated media content to discredit the United States.[4] Tactics ranged from publishing forgeries of official documents to using targeted fake stories which suited specific political contexts.

Although political disinformation is therefore not a new phenomenon, the modalities and forms that it takes have shifted. Research has also shown that false information is more likely to be spread on social media platforms, especially regarding political news.[5] The increasing use of social media has seen disinformation become more prolific given the increased speed and spread that digital platforms allow. Social media manipulation is now being used not only by authoritarian regimes and terrorist organisations but also mainstream political parties, in some cases to 'suppress human rights, discredit political

[3] Aristedes Mahairas & Mikhail Dvilyanski, 'Disinformation – Дезинформация (Dezinformatsiya)', *The Cyber Defense Review* 3/3, (2018), pp. 21–28.

[4] Nicholas J. Cull, Vasily Gatov, Peter Pomerantsev, Anne Applebaum & Alistair Shawcross, 'Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against it', *LSE Institute of Global Affairs*, October 2017. Available at: https://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/arena/2018/Jigsaw-Soviet-Subversion-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Final-Report.pdf (accessed 10 August 2021).

[5] Sara Brown, 'MIT Sloan research about social media, misinformation and elections', *MIT Management Sloan School*, 5 October 2020. Available at: https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/mit-sloan-research-about-social-media-misinformation-and-elections (accessed 10 August 2021).

opponents, and drown out dissenting opinions'.[6] Trolls and troll farms, bots and cyber warfare are all different tactics that being used by political actors to this end.[7]

Communications scholars and media policy makers differ in their use of terminology to describe this growing phenomenon. 'Online misinformation' and 'disinfodemic' have become synonymous terms that are used interchangeably, the latter most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, 'computational propaganda', or 'the use of algorithms, automation, and big data to shape public life', is also considered a form of disinformation.[8] UNESCO differentiates between disinformation, mal-information and misinformation although it acknowledges that all are 'orchestrated campaigns (to) spread untruths.'[9] They refer to the 'Information Disorder' glossary by the Shorenstein Centre which defines disinformation as

> false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological, or social motivations.[10]

Disinformation's key attribute is the fabrication of information with the intention to do harm. Misinformation lacks such malicious intent and mal-information entails the deliberate use of information which in itself *is* not necessarily false to cause harm, for example through leaks and hate speech.

Scope and Objectives of the Research

The Iraqi media is no stranger to disinformation narratives, having been a battleground between opposing factions for many years, driven by the political economy and dynamics of media capture. Declining trust in the political system and government have also allowed for narratives to spread more rapidly across social media, the platform of choice as citizens turn away from legacy media they see as partisan.[11] Iraq's conflict-driven political arena sees peripheral centres of power competing with each other in a number of ways, including in the public sphere.[12]

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[6] Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard,'The Global Disinformation Order', *Computational Propoaganda Research Project, University of Oxfor*d, 2019. Available at: https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf (accessed 10 August 2021).

[7] Bensoula Noureddine, 'Electronic Flies and Public Opinion', *Journal of Sociological and Historical Studies* 11/1 (2020), pp. 195–211.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Claire Wardle & Hossein Derakhshan, 'Thinking about "information disorder": Formats of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information', *Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation*. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/f._jfnd_handbook_module_2.pdf (accessed 10 August 2021).

[10] Claire Wardle, 'Information Disorder: the Essential Glossary', 2018. Available at: https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/infoDisorder_glossary.pdf?x25702 (accessed 10 August 2021).

[11] Aida Al-Kaisy, 'A Fragmented Landscape: Barriers to Independent Media in Iraq', *LSE Middle East Centre Report*, June 2019. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100991/ (accessed 10 August 2021).

[12] Mac Skelton & Zmkan A. Saleem, 'Iraq's Political Marketplace at the Subnational Level: The Struggle for Power in Three Provinces', *LSE Conflict Research Programme*, 2020. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105184/3/Iraq_s_Political_Marketplace.pdf (accessed 10 August 2021).

This research seeks to examine some of the key disinformation narratives that emerged in Iraq in 2020 and early 2021. Using discourse analysis, it focuses specifically on the disinformation narratives appearing in the mainstream media, looking at their genesis and different iterations. This paper had originally intended to identify disinformation narratives that emerged around the national elections which were planned for June 2021. Historically, elections in Iraq have been hotly contested and attempts to discredit political opponents have been rife. This invites examination of the extent to which the growth of explicit disinformation narratives serves to exacerbate an already politically volatile discursive environment. This focus was chosen because in any legitimate democracy citizens require accurate and transparent information during election periods to enable them to engage with political processes and make informed choices about electoral candidates. The media has an evident role to play in this process. In January 2021, however, the national elections were postponed until October 2021. The focus of this period of the analysis therefore shifted to examine narratives of disinformation that may have emerged around the decision to postpone the election.

Method

Discourse analysis was carried out on media content in the weeks beginning 18 and 25 January 2021 to examine the media narratives that were emerging around the decision to postpone national elections. In order to assess the mainstream media's role in disseminating disinformation at this time, the study focused on news and political programming that reported on the postponement. News agency websites (*al-Sumariya, al-Waa, Mawazeen, Nas News*), television channels (*al-Furat, al-Iraqiya, al-Itijah, Dijla*) and the websites of newspapers (*al-Bayna al-Jadida, al-Mushriq, al-Sabah*) were selected for this study. The platforms were chosen to reflect a range of political perspectives as well as for their popularity with Iraqi audiences. This is particularly relevant with regard to the television channels chosen because they are not only the most consumed form of media output but, arguably, also the most overtly politically partisan.[13] In total, 155 pieces of content were analysed for this study.

This discourse analysis was supplemented with interviews with 6 media practitioners and policy makers to validate and confirm findings. This also allowed the researcher to ensure that the analysis related to the socio-political context in Iraq of the time. Understanding of and reference to context remains key in any research undertaking, and in particular one involving discourse analysis, where it is important to consider the wider context within which the discourse is taking place.

[13] *Al-Furat* is owned by Ammar al-Hakim, former president of the Islamic Supreme Council, and leader of the National Wisdom Party; *al-Iraqiya* is the government-funded public broadcasting channel; *al-Itijah* is owned by Kataʾib Hezbollah (KH); *Dijla* is owned by Jamal al-Karbouli, an Iraqi politician who heads the National Movement for Development and Reform party (al-Hal).

A History of Disinformation in Iraq

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon in Iraq. Under Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, the media was used by the government as a tool for propaganda, with distortions of the truth and outright lies commonplace.[14] After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Coalition Provision Authority (CPA) and occupying US forces also used media as a means of mobilising support for their activities and presence in Iraq and the region. This ranged from leaflet drops to the creation of a new television channel, *al-Hurra Iraq*, by Voice of America (VOA). These platforms were used to advance the political ideologies of the US government and challenged local Iraqi narratives. Since then, both al-Qaeda and ISIL have used the media for the propagation and dissemination of extremist ideologies as well as instilling fear in areas that remained under their control. Although there are some distinguishing features between propaganda and disinformation, the former playing more on the emotional or 'non-rational',[15] the seeds were certainly planted for the misuse of media by elites and control of narratives to suit those in power.

Since 2003, the Iraqi media have been driven by a multitude of different actors with very specific motivations and political agendas. Lack of access to independent financing has seen them rely on funding from political actors and, more recently, paramilitary groups and external governments with geopolitical interests in Iraq.[16] Both state and non-state actors have relied on the media they finance to disseminate disinformation on their behalf, with little oversight from media regulatory bodies or watchdogs to ensure that standards of accuracy and transparency are properly observed. The Iraqi government and associated actors co-opted the media, in particular during the ethno-sectarian war from 2005, to embellish the partisan narratives that dominated the political and information spheres. This eventually gave credence to the legitimatisation of militias and sub-state actors at both a state and societal level.

In the 2018 national election in Iraq, a trend for 'deep fakes', or synthetically-generated videos, emerged in order to discredit candidates, particularly women, and discourage them from standing for election. Dr Intidhar Jassim, standing with the Victory Alliance of former PM Haider al-Abadi, was forced to withdraw her candidacy when a fake sex tape was circulated online.[17] Dr Jassim was vociferous in accusing members of opposing parties of creating the tape.

Increased access to digital platforms and social media has seen Iraqis subjected to the dissemination of propaganda and false content. 'Electronic flies' is a term used to describe false social media accounts, operated either by people or by bots, which adopt online trolling methods to disseminate political messages. Examples in Iraq include online trolling by pro-Iranian and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabian electronic armies to support their

[14] Benjamin Isakhan, 'Manufacturing Consent in Iraq: Interference in the post-Saddam Media Sector', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 3/1 (May 2009), pp. 7–26.

[15] Dean Jackson, 'Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation From Propaganda, Misinformation, And "Fake News"', *National Endowment for Democracy*, June 2018. Available at: https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Distinguishing-Disinformation-from-Propaganda.pdf (accessed 10 August 2021).

[16] Al-Kaisy, 'A Fragmented Landscape'.

[17] Naseem Tarawneh, 'Sextortion, harassment, and deepfakes: How digital weapons are being used to silence women', *IFEX*, 5 March 2020. Available at: https://ifex.org/sextortion-harassment-and-deepfakes-how-digital-weapons-are-being-used-to-silence-women/ (accessed 10 August 2021).

competing geo-political narratives. A series of investigations in June 2020 by Iraqi journalist Suadad Al-Salhy and *The Telegraph* reporter Wil Crisp found that political groups in Iraq were paying Facebook millions of dollars to drive traffic towards disinformation content. The report found that networks of fake accounts and pages had been created, claiming to be those of Iraqi politicians and in some cases even media organisations. Some of the largest networks were being funded by paramilitary groups such as Kataʾib Hezbollah, a member of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMFs), or *hashd al-shaʿabi*, an officially sanctioned network of paramilitary groups that were institutionalised by former PM Nouri al-Maliki in 2014 to fight against ISIL.[18] Further investigative work has also indicated that the Lebanese militant organisation Hezbollah was training operatives in Iraq in online disinformation tactics.[19]

Disinformation in the Iraqi Media in 2020

Research shows that public audiences are more likely to associate disinformation with the bias of a mainstream media platform than with social media.[20] In the many cases where mainstream media are addressing disinformation in attempts to debunk it, the disinformation becomes news, which effectively serves to further disseminate it.[21] In the case of Iraq, audiences have grown accustomed to a plethora of fake news and content as well the use of mainstream media for propaganda purposes. Consequently, they are turning away from mainstream platforms to social media for their news and here the playing field is even more contested.[22]

The killing of General Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis at Baghdad Airport by a US drone strike in January 2020, combined with continuing anti-establishment protests and the COVID-19 pandemic led to a number of distinct disinformation narratives and trends emerging on Iraqi social media throughout the year. These were then perpetuated by the mainstream media. Research on media consumption in Iraq has shown that there is widespread news fatigue amongst Iraqi audiences. They are also aware of the increase in disinformation narratives, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic, further embedding fear and mistrust of official institutions and media platforms.[23]

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[18] Suadad Al Salhi & Wil Crisp, 'Iraqi groups paying facebook millions to churn fake news', *Telegraph Online*, 15 June 2020. Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2020/06/14/iraqi-groups-paying-facebook-millions-churn-fake-news/ (accessed 10 August 2021).

[19] Suadad Al Salhi & Wil Crisp, 'Exclusive: Inside Hezbollah's fake news training camps', *Telegraph Online*, 2 August 2020. Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/02/exclusive-inside-hezbollahs-fake-news-training-camps-sowing/ (accessed 10 August 2021).

[20] Ahmed Al Rawi, 'Gatekeeping Fake News Discourses on Mainstream Media versus Social Media', *Social Science Computer Review* 37/6 (2018), pp. 687–704.

[21] Yariv Tsfati, Hajo G. Boomgaarden, Jesper Strömbäck, Rens Vliegenthart, Alyt Damstra & Elina Lindgren, 'Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News: Literature review and synthesis', *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44/2 (2020), pp. 157–73.

[22] 'How do Iraqi consume media and what implications does this have?', *BBC Media Action*, 2019. Available at: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/research-summaries/iraq-media-consumption-jan2019.pdf (accessed 10 August 2021).

[23] 'Fake News in Iraq', *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 2020. Available at: https://iwpr.net/global-voices/fake-news-iraq (accessed 10 August 2021).

Targeting Activists and Journalists

Threats and the harassment of journalists and activists in Iraq remain endemic and pervasive, both in the physical and online spheres. These often begin with allegations and content falsely associating them with parties often considered to be enemies of Iraq, namely the United States or the Gulf countries. One of the most high-profile of these cases took place in September 2019, when messages began circulating on Iraqi social media accusing twelve journalists and human rights defenders of 'wanting to normalise relations with Israel'. Some have suggested that these claims were issued as a death threat to the journalists. One of those targeted, Ali Wajeeh, wrote a letter to the prime minister asking if there was a 'directive' from government calling for the death of the journalists.[24]

There has also been a rise in disinformation about the protest movement in order to undermine the protestors and their demands. Accusations levelled include receiving support and funding from the US as well as being against Islamic values. Because some of the October 2019 revolutionaries had dressed up as the main character from the film, *The Joker*, the term *jokeriya* was adopted to refer to the protest movement. The term has since been employed by politicians and media in order to both belittle the protestors and associate them with foreign interests, implying that *jokeriya* are those supporting the agendas of the US and Israel. This smear has indelibly put the lives of activists in danger as a result.

This has been seen on a number of channels associated with the PMF such as *al-Afaq, al-Ahad* and *al-Itijah*. *Al-Afaq*, affiliated with former PM Nouri al-Maliki, ran a news report on 10 January using the term *jokeriya*, which accused foreign forces of falsifying news regarding the protest movement.[25] Keen to promote the view that the protest movement was declining and increasingly ineffective, the PMF-affiliated outlets accused channels such as the US-funded *al-Hurra* and the Saudi-funded *Saud Channel* of using old footage from October 2019 to show that the protest movement was still active.

On 11 January 2011, a programme broadcast on UTV included an interview with a spokesperson from AAH, Abdul Amir Taiban, who claimed that protestors in Al-Haboubi Square in Nasiriyah were being supported by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and America. An activist who also appeared on the programme challenged him, saying he was putting lives in danger with his falsehoods and hate speech which would lead to further violence and killings.

It should be noted that accusations of foreign funding have been used to incite violence against protestors more broadly, although this tends to be apparent on social media channels rather than traditional media platforms. For example, in a tweet on 8 February 2020, Muqtada al-Sadr called on protestors to abandon their foreign backers,[26] inciting violence against them if they ignored his threats. A similar Twitter statement from Kataʾib Hezbollah on 8 January 2020 included threats upon the lives of protestors who continue to receive support from the US. In both of these instances, the disinformation narrative was

[24] 'Dozens of Iraqi journalists blacklisted on social networks', *Reporters Sans Frontieres*, 2019. Available at: https://rsf.org/en/news/dozens-iraqi-journalists-blacklisted-social-networks (accessed 10 August 2021).
[25] 'News bulletin', *Al Afaq*. 10 January 2020.
[26] Muqtada al-Sadr, Tweet, 8 February 2020. Available at https://twitter.com/Mu_AlSadr/status/1226119773836238848 (accessed 11 August 2021).

not only reinforced but weaponised.[27] In August 2020, activist Riham Yacoub was shot dead in Basra after a fake video circulated on social media showed her leading demonstrations and chants on the street, accompanied by rumours that she was acting as a US agent fomenting violent unrest in the city.[28]

Another common narrative used to discredit the movement is to accuse protestors of promoting homosexuality, drug and alcohol consumption as well as prostitution, positioning them as against Islamic values and society. When social media activist and regular protestor Safa al-Saraay was killed on 28 October 2019 after being shot in the head by a tear gas cannister, narratives which painted him as anti-religious and morally corrupt were rife on social media. This has led to the waning of public sympathy with the protestors in some instances, with attacks against them increasingly legitimised among some.

Such disinformation strategies are being fuelled by the government-sanctioned PMF network and related armed groups as well as government security services and officials. Renad Mansour argues that the PMF 'enjoys a symbiotic relationship with Iraq's security services, political parties and economy' and are afforded state power by being assimilated into the Iraqi political system.[29] The PMF's strong connections to the 'network of power' that Mansour describes as the Iraqi state mean that they have a vested interest in maintaining the current political system. So as to protect it, they are explicitly using disinformation techniques to intimidate and silence voices critical of the political system.

Foreign Interests in Iraq

In January 2020, after Iran carried out ballistic missile attacks on US military bases in Iraq in retaliation for the killing of Soleimani, cheaply made 'deep fake' videos of the attacks circulated across social media. Social media actors used footage from rocket attacks in Ukraine and Palestine, for example, to stoke fear of Iranian reprisals locally and internationally. In some cases, the videos themselves were not manipulated but were posted with the deliberate intention of spreading false information and rumours simply by attributing them to Iran.

There has also been an increase in the numbers of misleading videos circulating on social media related to attacks on US bases and convoys in Iraq. Events in some of the videos are falsely attributed while others give an exaggerated impression of the scale of the attacks. Groups within the PMF set up fake social media accounts of non-existent paramilitary groups which claim responsibility for the attacks. Such groups surface using online proclamations on social media to claim responsibility only to subsequently disappear. One example was a group dubbing themselves *al-Shaab al-Kahf*, who claimed responsibility for a rocket attack on the US embassy in Baghdad in November 2020.

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[27] Feras Kilani, Tweet, 8 January 2020. Available at: https://twitter.com/FerasKilaniBBC/status/1214953144901423104 (accessed 11 August 2021).

[28] Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, 'Why did they kill Riham Yacoub?', *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 24 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/ (accessed 10 August 2021).

[29] Renad Mansour, 'Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state of Iraq', Chatham House, 25 February 2021. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/2021-02-25-networks-of-power-mansour.pdf (accessed 10 August 2021).

Paramilitary groups continue to spread disinformation via social media, using fake accounts, claiming responsibility for attacks on US targets or forces that in fact never took place. Such accounts often express support for Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a PMF leader who was killed alongside Qasem Soleimani. For example, a group going under the name of the 'Thaʾr al-Muhandis Brigade' posted a clip on 22 May 2020 allegedly showing a Chinook helicopter being shot out of the sky. This has since been proven to be a fabrication. Nonetheless, the post was then covered in a news bulletin on *al-Alam TV*, a mainstream media channel funded by Iran. There have also been suggestions that the Kataʾib Hezbollah paramilitary group was one of the militias behind the creation of these false accounts. Another example of the use of a disinformation narrative appeared in September 2020. In this case, social media posts circulated alleging the US embassy had been closed and the US ambassador had left for Erbil. The disinformation was subsequently uncritically circulated by popular mainstream television channels such as *Dijla*, *al-Arabiya, al-Sharqiya* and *al-Hadath*.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a new context of uncertainity and anxiety in Iraq. Since its inception, there has been some evidence of rural and tribal communities, clearly influenced by disinformation, being less likely to visit hospitals when showing signs of illness because trust in the government and associated institutions, including medical, is at an all-time low. As a consequence, the state's communication and narrative around the pandemic has been usurped by anti-establishment actors. False narratives that the government were using COVID-19 as an excuse to clampdown on the protest movement and free movement more generally or to delay public sector salary payments were disseminated. Rumours that the virus was created by the US or, in some cases, that it was being used by ISIL to facilitate their return to Iraq were common. These narratives were all reinforced on television and on social media.

In late March 2020, a number of Iraqi media outlets reported that a local pharmaceutical company had found a cure for COVID-19. These reports came after the drug company Pioneer posted on Facebook that it was continuing to provide drugs that might be effective in treating the new coronavirus. The media then jumped on this post, misinterpreting it and spreading false claims. A similar story ran a week later regarding another pharmaceutical company Samaraa, despite both companies denying these reports. This type of disinformation becomes particularly harmful in a country where trust in the medical profession is already low and vaccine hesitancy is high.[30] A report by the Vaccine Confidence Project at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine which tracked vaccine confidence globally found that one of the key threats to successful vaccine programe is the 'rapid and global spread of minformation.'[31] A recent report in *Middle East Eye* also

[30] Omar Dewachi, Mac Skelton, Vinh-Kim Nguyen, Fouad M. Fouad, Ghassan Abu Sitta, Zeina Maasri & Rita Giacaman, 'Changing therapeutic geographies of the Iraqi and Syrian wars', *The Lancet*, 2014. Available at: https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(13)62299-0/fulltext (accessed 11 August 2021).

[31] 'Largest global vaccine confidence survey reveals hesitancy hotspots', *London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine*, 2020. Available at: https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2020/largest-global-vaccine-confidence-survey-reveals-hesitancy-hotspots (accessed 11 August 2021).

suggested that the growth of disinformation around vaccines was 'undermining attempts to halt the spread of the disease.'[32]

For example, on 2 April 2020, *Reuters* published an article which claimed that official figures on cases and deaths from the virus in Iraq were inaccurate and higher than that being reported in the Iraqi media.[33] The report referenced three doctors, a representative from the Ministry of Health and an unnamed political figure – all anonymously as medical staff had been told not to speak to the media – who suggested that the numbers of cases were in the thousands rather than the hundreds, as claimed by the Iraqi government. The report alleged that the government was hiding accurate data from the Iraqi public, a claim which has been denied by the health ministry. In response, the Communications and Media Commission (CMC), Iraq's media regulator, suspended Reuters' licence to operate in Iraq for three months and fined them 25 million Iraqi dinars ($21,000).[34] They accused the agency of risking public safety and jeopardising efforts to contain the pandemic. National and international press freedom organisations protested this as a clampdown on freedom of expression and a blatant attempt to misinform the Iraqi public on the spread of the disease. The license was reissued two weeks later following an intervention by President Barham Salih.

An interview broadcast on *al-Sharqiya News* on 17 July 2020 gave a platform to advisors to the Iraqi government task force for COVID-19 who claimed that Iraq would be receiving vaccines from China and the UAE by 1 September. This claim, which was untrue, was circulated across media platforms and broadly believed by the Iraqi public.

Fake Accounts

Fake social media accounts continue to proliferate, with many impersonating high-profile figures with the aim of extortion and blackmail. Examples include a fake profile claiming to be that of Haidar al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organisation which comprises a political party and a paramilitary group with the PMF. Other fake profiles were set up in the names of the Minister of Finance, Ali Allawi, and the Defence Minister Gomma Enad. Many of these accounts have also sent threats to activists and protestors and leaked official documents in order to threaten politicians. There have also been fake accounts created with the names and logos of both the Iraqi Central Bank and Iraqi Airways, the latter circulating false timetables. The unauthorised social media accounts associated with the Iraqi Central Bank have been spreading false claims about the availability of loans aimed at extorting the personal information of the staff of government ministries.

Facebook claimed to have closed down 324 fake accounts in Iraq (and Tunisia) in May

[32] Alex MacDonald, 'Covid-19: Iraq's doctors struggle against vaccine fears as cases hit new highs', *Middle East Eye*, 1 May 2021. Available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/Iraq-doctors-struggle-Covid-19-vaccine-fears (accessed 11 August 2021).

[33] 'Iraq has confirmed thousands more Covid-19 cases than reported, medics say', *Reuters*, 2020. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-iraq/iraq-has-confirmed-thousands-more-covid-19-cases-than-reported-medics-say-idUKKBN21K2H6 (accessed 11 August 2021).

[34] 'Iraqi regulator suspends Reuters license for 3 months over Covid-19 report', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 2020. Available at: https://cpj.org/2020/04/iraqi-regulator-suspends-reuters-license-for-3-mon/ (accessed 11 August 2021).

2020 as part of their Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB) project report.[35] One of the networks removed appeared to have been financed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). It is also worth noting that a Parliamentary committee has very recently been formed to investigate this growing trend. However, some Iraqi human rights defenders and campaigners for freedom of expression question whether official concern about disinformation might be used to pass a controversial cybercrimes bill and other legislation that would significantly curb wider civil liberties and free speech. Although the Iraqi Parliament dropped its proposed cybercrimes draft law in February 2021, there were a number of proposed constraints on online and social media usage and communications which were likely to have been used to silence dissenting voices. A new draft is yet to be submitted to Parliament and, as attacks on critical opinions are becoming more widespread and violent, both on and offline, there remain concerns that any proposed legislation will be used to further crackdown on freedom of expression.[36]

Anti-Government Sentiment, al-Kadhimi and the 2021 Iraqi Election

We have examined examples of narratives and strategies that are clearly intended to disseminate falsehoods. However, the role of disinformation narratives becomes considerably murkier in contexts where it is difficult to establish a demonstrably correct accurate narrative to serve as a benchmark of truth or falsity. This can be illustrated through an examination of the media narratives that surrounded the postponement of the Iraqi national elections.

The Iraqi prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi was appointed primarily to deal with the pandemic and in an attempt to respond to protestors' demands for early free and fair elections.[37] Because of this narrow mandate, his selection initially attracted cross-party support. However, his subsequent attempts to deal with increasing violence against activists, missile attacks against foreign interests in Iraq, and the impunity of paramilitary groups were met with systemic resistance resulting a number of concerted campaigns to discredit him and his government. These have become more heightened in the wake of proposed national elections as political parties begin to compete for public confidence and votes.

In July 2020, in what appears to have been a clear attempt to respond positively to the demands of the protest movement, al-Kadhimi announced that national elections would be held on 6 June 2021, a year in advance of the original schedule of May 2022. This decision attracted widespread public approval. Protestors had also called for reform of the electoral system in order to ensure fairer representation across Iraq, and ultimately a more inclusive election. Parliament passed a new electoral law, originally introduced under the auspices of former PM Abdul Mahdi, which was subsequently criticised for its failure to reduce the domination of certain parties in parliament thereby making fair representation

[35] 'May 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour Report', *Facebook*, 2020. Available at: https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/may-cib-report/ (accessed 11 August 2021).

[36] Kristen Sibbald, 'Iraq Parliament Suspends Draconian Cybercrimes Bill', *Human Rights Watch*, 2021. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/07/iraq-parliament-suspends-draconian-cybercrimes-bill (accessed 11 August 2021).

[37] Marsin Alshamary, 'Six months into his premiership, what has Mustafa al-Kadhimi done for Iraq?', *Brookings*, 13 November 2020. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/13/six-months-into-his-premiership-what-has-mustafa-al-kadhimi-done-for-iraq/ (accessed 11 August 2021).

for political independents much less likely. The claimed deficiencies of the new law notwithstanding, it did mandate a significant increase in the number of electoral districts and the implementation of new individual nomination procedures for political candidates, both of which would require significant logistical adjustments.

The new electoral law states that the date of the national election should be agreed by the Council of Ministers (COM) in coordination with the cross-party Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and this should be followed by a Presidential decree. Parliament must be dissolved two months in advance of the election date. On 19 January 2021, following days of speculation, a decision to postpone the elections was announced. A proposal to delay the elections had been submitted by IHEC which was then approved by the COM. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), IHEC had indeed held a number of meetings with Iraqi leaders and policymakers explaining the need for more time to ensure that all logistic and legislative measures were met to ensure free and fair elections could take place. These measures include for example 'register(ing) political alliances and candidates, to expand biometric registration, and to deploy UN international electoral expertise and international observers on the ground.'[38]

Countering the claim that the election was postponed for solely logistical and technical reasons, however, were a number of mainstream media narratives that claimed that in fact it was al-Kadhimi and his government, and not IHEC, who were the key proponents of postponement. In other words, the claimed logistical and technical reasons were false. One of the overriding narratives was that al-Kadhimi never really wanted early elections as, along with the other political blocs, he knew that early elections would not be in the interest of those currently in power. This narrative was often accompanied by a partisan political source inside parliament claiming that agreements were being made behind closed doors between various political parties to postpone elections once again until May 2022, the original official date. For example, on 23 January 2021, *Al Mushreq* newspaper quoted the MP Kazem al-Sayadi, from the opposition State of Law Coalition, in an article titled 'A new political agreement to delay parliamentary elections until 2022?'. This was followed by a similar claim made by Ghazanfar al-Battikh, the leader of another opposition parliamentary bloc, the Fatah Coalition, in an article from 24 January 2021.

Another widespread narrative perpetuated across different media platforms (and news agency websites in particular) was that al-Kadhimi put pressure on IHEC to delay the elections for ostensibly technical reasons. This narrative was pushed predominantly by Muqtada al-Sadr and his Sairoon Alliance, who have consistently questioned the prime minister's decisions regarding the elections. The news agency websites *Mawazeen* and the government funded *al-Waa* both referenced sources from Sairoon, including a tweet by Sadr himself on 18 January 2021, the day of the election postponement. This narrative was also reproduced in programming on the *al-Itijah* channel of Kata'ib Hezbollah, a paramilitary group within the PMF.

[38] 'Iraq's electorial preparations and processes report No 5.', *United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)*, 2021. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-s-electoral-preparations-and-processes-report-no-5 (accessed 11 August 2021).

Discourse analysis also revealed another narrative centred around the claim that the elections could no longer be considered early and therefore al-Kadhimi had not met the demands of the people. This narrative was clearly intended to undermine al-Kadhimi in the eyes of the protestors and public, and was prominent across the mainstream broadcast media's coverage of the postponement decision. In these cases, it was mostly programme presenters who made these claims. In a political programme on the *al-Itijah* channel on 19 January 2021, called the 'Hour of Exposure: Al-Kadhimi's government: No elections, no reforms, no budgets', for example, the presenter Ali al-Zaidi interrupted his guests a number of times to repeat some of the anti-Kadhimi narratives outlined above. However, a programme which appeared on *al-Furat* channel on 25 January 2021, entitled 'The elections are plagued by postponement. Will you give up?', included MP Muhaned al-Atabi from the Nahj al-Watani party claiming that elections could only be classified as early if they were held within two years of the previous election.

Politicians were the original sources of many of these competing and mostly unverifiable media narratives clearly aimed at discrediting al-Kadhimi. Media outlets would then reference and include their comments from social media. This draws attention to the role that the mainstream media are playing in uncritically disseminating unverifiable and politically partisan narratives. It also points up a worrying trend in Iraq of social media content driving mainstream media narratives and informing media content. Whether this is a result of having to keep up with 24-hour news cycles or a quest to gain further audience share, it is clearly problematic when verification skills and professional ethics are low.[39] It is also worth noting that the media's overreliance on political experts as sources further exacerbates this situation. Broadcast media were actively encouraging highly questionable narratives, perhaps paradoxically through their questioning and choice of guests.

In contrast, the government-funded media platforms, such as the flagship television channel *al-Iraqiya*, *al-Sabah* newspaper and the *al-Waa* news agency largely ignored narratives questioning the reasons behind the election postponement. This is hardly surprising given the close relationship between the public media platforms and the government. Senior management positions at *al-Iraqiya* are chosen by the government and the current Director General, Nabil Jassim, was directly appointed by al-Kadhimi in July 2020. The question thus arises as to how the Iraqi public is to distinguish between narratives based on what can reasonably be described as accurate and verifiable information from those narratives clearly intended to disinform them?

[39] Tsfati et. al., 'Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News'.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, overt disinformation in the form of such things as fake social media accounts, 'deep fakes' and patently false media narrative has become endemic in Iraq. The use of disinformation in Iraq also serves, moreover, to remind us that it can be used by both those in power as well as their opponents. In many such cases the malicious intent of such narratives is readily apparent because it is relatively easily exposed through juxtaposition with evidently more plausible and verifiable narratives. In other words, there is bona fide information against which distorting claims and narratives can be judged.

It is precisely because disinformation has become so ubiquitous that it also creates a context in which it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between the veracity of competing media narratives where the supposed truth of the matter is harder to discern, as in the case of the decision to postpone the Iraqi national election shows. The claim that the decision to postpone the elections was primarily based upon logistical and technical factors is given some plausibility by virtue of UNAMI's seeming endorsement. However, for a host of widely acknowledged reasons, such as the increase in violence, the continuing lack of access to basic public services, coupled with the evident recourse to disinformation narratives by Iraqi governments and the media platforms they control when it has suited their purposes, it is understandable why the Iraqi public's trust in the government has declined over the years.

The main narratives challenging the government's own account of the postponement decision clearly sought to draw upon the low level of public mistrust. They variously claimed that al-Kadhimi was manipulative, even fraudulent, and could not deliver an early election despite his stated commitment to the protestors and the Iraqi public. Highly partisan media serve only to exacerbate further the blurring of the line between information and disinformation. What remains unanswered is whether or not logistical problems would have arisen if the elections had gone ahead as planned. All of the narratives can thus be seen as incomplete in the absence of unassailable evidence about the technical and logistic challenges or lack thereof arising as a consequence of changing the electoral date. On what basis then does the Iraqi public choose between a range of thoroughly partisan narratives?

In very challenging political and social contexts, such as that found in Iraq, questions must be therefore be raised about the limited utility of concepts such as disinformation, when what might be unequivocally described as information is itself increasingly hard to discern. At the very least, it suggests that we need to think more carefully about what we understand by the term disinformation and, by extension, its counterpoint information, as well as the criteria we use to distinguish between the two. Even in contexts that seem much less challenging than that presented by Iraq, there is arguably a need to think very carefully about the borderline between information and disinformation.

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Cover Image
One of the last pictures taken by Reuters Iraqi photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen before he was killed on 12 July 2007 shows two old women dressed in black walking towards a window pierced by a bullet in the al-Amin al-Thaniyah neighbourhood of Baghdad. US soldiers took Noor-Eldeen's two digital cameras from the scene after he was killed.
REUTERS/Namir Noor-Eldeen/Alamy

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