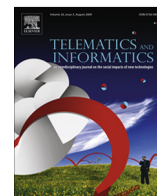




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The influence of sectarian and tribal discourse in newspapers readers' online comments about freedom of expression, censorship and national unity in Kuwait



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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes strands of sectarian and tribal discourse in newspapers readers' online comments (NROCs) and their impact on attitudes to freedom of expression, censorship and national unity in Kuwait. It finds that minority, Shiite, and the lower ranked social group, Bedouins, are identified as disloyal to Kuwait, backward and uncivilized in the NROCs. The outcomes of an experiment that engage 715 subjects indicate that the non-readers of the sectarian and tribal comments are in favor of censoring NROCs. Also, readers of sectarian NROCs are more likely to declare that the sectarian comments damage Kuwait's national unity. The findings are discussed in the light of the negative social effects of hateful online speech and the role that editors of NROCs need to assume in order to counter such speech.

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1. Introduction

Researchers (Cammaerts, 2009; Domingo, 2008; Nielsen, 2010; Santana, 2010) have cautioned against the destructive impact of hate discourse expressed in people's comments in online discussions and online newspapers. In Kuwait, the Emir has expressed his concern over hate discourse in some of his public speeches (Kuwait Times, 2013). The Kuwaiti government has inaugurated public campaigns to alert people to online hate speech, which consists of religious and ethnic bigotry that divides society and increases antagonism among its citizens (Trygg, 2012). The government also introduced an online publication law (Al-Turki, 2013). It argues that it preserves harmony in society while opponents accuse the government of suppressing freedom of expression and censoring the Internet (Saeid, 2010).

Scholars assert that hate discourse is offensive, insulting and threatening, discriminatory and stimulates hostility against the others (Benesch, 2008). It affronts another race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or background (Erjavec and Kovačić, 2012). It is the "utterances that are intended to cause damage, and/or irrespective of intent, that their receivers perceive to result in damage" (Leets, 2002, p. 243). Like racial discourse in the West, sectarian and tribal hate speech in online media has concerned many Kuwaitis. In Kuwait, sectarianism refers to the differences between Sunnis and Shiites. The major disparity between the two factions is over the succession to the Prophet Muhammad, where Sunnis believe that Muslims should select their ruler while Shiites believe that the Imam, a successor of the Prophet Mohammed, has to rule (Blanchard, 2005). In

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Kuwait, 70% of citizens are Sunnis and 30% are Shiites. Friction between Sunnis and Shiites has escalated upon the establishment of a Shiite government in Iran in 1979. This government, led by Khomeini, declared it would export its revolution to the dominantly Sunni Arab Gulf region (Ramazani, 2004).

Tribalism refers to the origin or historical place of dwelling, which was the desert before moving to the city. Although all people in Kuwait currently settle in modern cities, tension has recently arisen between the Hadar (historically the Kuwait city-dwellers) and the Bedouins who lived in the desert and moved to the city about 40 years ago (Ghabra, 1997). During the 70s, the government granted the Bedouins citizenship in order to gain their loyalty and encourage them to run for the National Assembly election to support the government. Many Hadar have accused the Bedouins of being latecomers since then (Ghabra, 1997; Stephenson, 2011). Nowadays, many columnists have argued that tension has recently heightened because some television networks, backed by wealthy Hadar, have promoted hatred against Bedouins (Nordenson, 2012). Wealthy Hadar, who have dictated politics and the economy, are worried now that the growing number of Bedouins, 60% of nationals, will curb their domination (Al-Nakib, 2014; Longva, 2006).

This study first analyzes the tribal and sectarian hate speech expressed in the newspapers readers' online comments (NROCs). This speech is noteworthy, given the influential role of religion and culture in Kuwait (Nydell, 2012). Exploring this sort of hate speech is novel because most studies have focused on racial hate speech. Also, these studies have been conducted in the West (Loke, 2012; Thornton, 2009). If scholars still probe racial hate speech in Western democratic liberal and advanced nations, in which minorities enjoy more rights and protection, it is to be expected that hate speech against minorities in non-democratic, developing and conservative countries will be more unsettling.

Second, this study conducts an experiment to address the impact of sectarian and tribal NROCs on beliefs about freedom of expression, censorship and Kuwait's national unity. Previous research has explored the influence of NROCs on journalism as a field (Erjavec and Kovačič, 2012; Faridani et al., 2010; Lee, 2010a) and the discourse of hate speech comments (Loke, 2012; Thornton, 2009). It has also been concerned with the level of control that people exercise over the content of NROCs. The current research examines the influence that readers exercise, through their comments, on other readers (Lee, 2010a).

2. Literature review

2.1. NROCs: an overview

Loke (2012, p. 239) defines NROCs as the "readers' comments that accompany a single specific news story on the news website. It is a section dedicated to the opinions and reactions of readers placed at the end of the news story where readers are invited to respond". These NROCs are a conduit in which people voice their opinions (Thornton, 2009). For newspapers, having NROCs implies that they are devotees of free speech and gatherers of diverse viewpoints (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011). Online newspapers permit people to comment on content in order to appear interactive and adaptive to progress in the field. In addition, online newspapers survey ONRCs to determine the issues that trigger readership interest (Faridani et al., 2010). Last, comments, especially the offensive, attract readership, something that advertisers demand (Erjavec and Kovačič, 2012). Loke (2012) asserts that racial comments provide no significant discussion but their discourse is appealing to many readers. He mentions the example of the *Austin American-Statesman* that allows the appearance of comments expressing racial sentiments against African Americans to stimulate readership (Loke, 2012).

Scholars (e.g. Frost, 2006) suggest that NROCs amplify people's interest and participation in politics which have habitually been the concern of elitist groups. Loke (2012, p. 240) says that the NROCs are "the modern day lobbies of news organizations providing a virtual space for public discourse" that extends democratic practices. Many scholars from non-democratic nations think that Internet discussions elevate engagement in politics to newer and higher levels (Dashti, 2009; Simon, 2001; Simon et al., 2002). People of these nations, who have long been deprived of involvement in politics, now express their honest opinions with less censorship. Internet interactivity can set up a watchdog on Arab governments (Pintak, 2008), shed light on these governments' malpractices (Dashti and Al-Fadhli, 2011) and permit minorities to express their dissent from cultural prejudices (Sharif and Al-Kandari, 2010).

The discussions in the online newspapers have altered readers' perceptions of the role journalists play in manipulating public opinion (Lee, 2010b). Currently, Kuwaiti online newspaper readers question the validity of the methods the editors use to frame events. Some uncensored NROCs have accused the editors of a subjective siding with specific sides in news stories. They say that the editors omit specific information to back certain ideologies (Dashti and Al-Fadhli, 2011). These NROCs have also transformed the way people view issues of public opinion (Lee, 2010b). For example, NROCs permit Kuwaiti readers to view, compare and contrast between different stances that other readers express. Al-Saggaf (2006) finds that the NROCs on Al-Arabiya's online news stories are derogatory of the coverage of Al-Arabiya. Abdul-Mageed (2008) also finds that Al Jazeera's readers actively provide background information and analysis to different issues in their NROCs.

Online newspaper editors have been discomfited over the handling of NROCs. While they have to let readers participate and freely express their opinions, they also have to adhere to standards of decency and social responsibility (CBCNews, 2009; Loller, 2007). The New York Times, which surveyed people's participation in online forums, found that some were unhappy about censoring or blocking some comments while the others stated that it was indispensable to censor dogmatic and extreme comments (as cited in Schultz, 2000). Accordingly, several American online newspapers prevent aggressive, racist and inflammatory comments (Nielsen, 2010). Thornton (2009) mentions the example of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* which censors hate comments about Muslims, gays and other races.

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