



Western News and Social Media Websites Broker Information for Iraq's Political Web

In Iraq's online political networks, Western news media such as the BBC and CNN and social media such as Wikipedia and Wordpress serve as the primary brokers for news and information about elections and campaigns. Iraq's political parties are more likely to link to these sites than to each other.

Western Media Networks

Despite the unstable political and security situation on the ground, Iraq's political parties have built a vibrant public sphere online. But perhaps surprising is the degree to which Western media and social networking applications are brokers for political news and information for that country's online political discourse.

To understand online information brokerage in Iraq, a comprehensive list of political party URLs was drawn up for the official websites of Iraq's political parties. These sites were then crawled to catalogue links structure and create a network map of Iraq's online political landscape. The map, Figure 1, reveals the kinds of websites that are commonly linked to by websites across the spectrum of political ideologies.

Most often found are links to Western webpages on news sites, such as the BBC, CNN, the Guardian, and Reuters. Surprisingly, Al-Jazeera had only half as many links—five in total—as the BBC.

Just as interesting is the prominence of social media as information brokers for Iraq's political parties. Their political messaging depends very much on content found on Blogger, YouTube, Wikipedia and Wordpress.

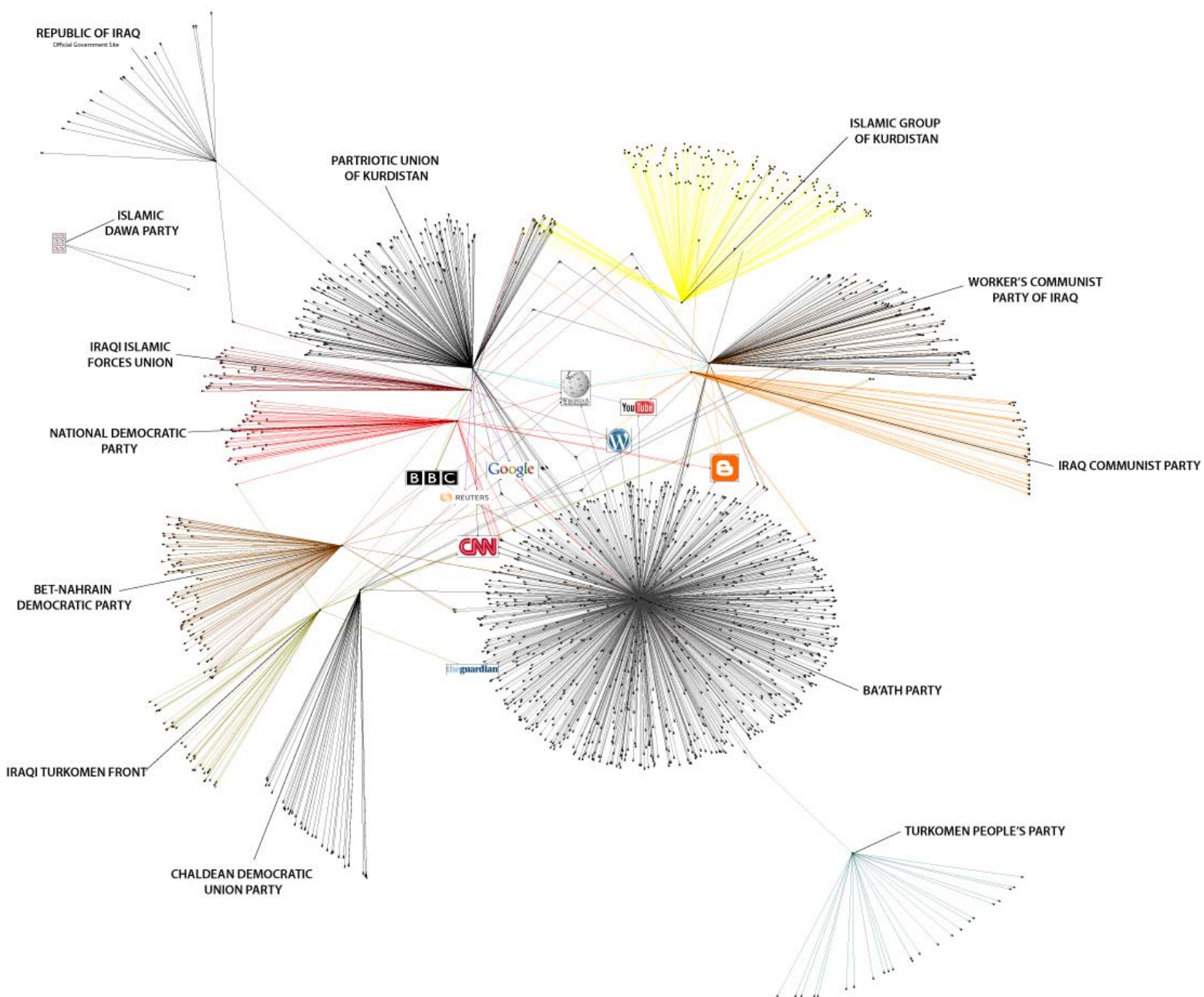
All in all, fourteen major and minor political parties were included in the study. The Ba'aath party had the most extensive link structure. Most parties had a few linkages to each other's content, but no discernable connections were found between the Islamic Dawa Party and the rest of the online political sphere in Iraq. The two major Kurdish parties—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Islamic Group of Kurdistan—had the largest number of shared link both in terms of linking to other similar addresses and in terms of linking to each other's pages.

Figure 1 was generated using a Microsoft Research program called NodeXL. The program algorithm places the website nodes that serve as "best centers" in the middle of the map.

Aiden Duffy and Philip N. Howard.
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Figure 1: Network Linkage Map between Political Parties in Iraq



The placement of these sites at the center of the network map reveals how important social media and Western news sources are to the flow of political information in Iraqi politics.

New digital technologies such as the internet afford political parties the opportunity to engage with each other's content, but such actors do not always do so. Moreover, there may be strategic reasons for giving website visitors links to credible news sources and social media than for giving website visitors a link to a political competitor's website. European sites, such as the BBC, also link Iraqi political parties together, but are secondary to U.S. news media. It is likely that much of the social media content that Iraqi political parties link to comes from Iraqis themselves: citizen journalists, young tech savvy activists, and aspiring political candidates.

The majority of the websites are in Arabic or Aramaic, but the Western sites they link to are almost exclusively in English. This could indicate either a lack of Arabic media that meet the needs of Iraqi political parties or a lack of awareness that such media exist.

The results of the network generation show Western media outlets at the center of the online Iraqi political network. The most important online information infrastructure for Iraqi politics is Western-owned and created media infrastructure, such as BlogSpot,

CNN, YouTube, Wikipedia, Google, and the BBC.

Methods

A comprehensive list of Iraq's political party data was built using both the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook and Wikipedia, anticipating that this combination of "official" and "unofficial" data could bring major and minor, new and established parties to the list. Several search engines and media databases were consulted to confirm the URLs for parties that had websites. In total these fourteen political parties had 1,753 external links to 1,611 target sites.

To analyze the structure, Web Data Extractor crawled each of political party URLs and extracted all external-facing URLs on the entire directory for each URL. An XML based add-in for Excel 2007 called NodeXL, developed by a team funded by Microsoft Research, was used to create network maps with the data like that pulled from Web Data Extractor. NodeXL generated the Network Linkage Map between Political Parties in Iraq in Figure 1. The map arrangement of nodes and clusters is based on the Harel-Kore algorithm, which groups the nodes (individual sites as dots) based on common external links. This method also captured numerous links to internet tools, such as Google and Adobe.

About the Project

The Project on Information Technology and Political Islam at the University of Washington's Department of Communication investigates the politics of information infrastructures in Muslim societies, and the civic and political uses of digital media in the Muslim world. This research was supported by the World Information Access Project (www.wiareport.org) and funded by the National Science Foundation under award IIS-0713074. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.