

الحركة الاجتماعية في البحرين عام 2011 والبُعد الطائفي في التعليقات الإلكترونية

حسين عباس مراد*

علي عبد الصمد دشتي**

أحمد عبد الرحمن دشتي***

الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة لتحليل ومقارنة تعليقات قراء الأخبار السياسية، عبر المواقع الإلكترونية المتعلقة في مواضيع، نُشرت في مواقع صحف إلكترونية من دول الخليج العربي، تحديداً الكويت، والمملكة العربية السعودية، ودولة عربية أخرى، تتسم ببعدها الجغرافي عن دول الخليج. تتمحور مشكلة البحث حول دور الحركة الاجتماعية السياسية التي ظهرت في مملكة البحرين خلال عام 2011، وأدت إلى انتشار كبير لآراء وتعليقات قراء مختلفة، لهذا الحدث الإخباري.

ناقشت الدراسة ثلاثة أسئلة بحثية، وفرضية واحدة. لقد أتبع الباحثون في هذه الدراسة منهجية تحليل المحتوى لـ 124 مقالة إخبارية، ظهرت على الصفحة الأولى من الصحف الإلكترونية (الوطن)، و(الرياض)، و(الأهرام)، في تغطيتها للحركة الاجتماعية السياسية في البحرين عام 2011. تتضمن هذه المقالات 30 خبراً من (الوطن)، و20 خبراً من (الرياض)، و19 خبراً من (الأهرام)، وصل عدد التعليقات فيها إلى 1,929 تعليقاً فردياً، بصفة ردود على أخبار الحركة الاجتماعية السياسية في البحرين. أظهرت النتائج أن الغالبية الساحقة من هذه التعليقات كانت ضد قيام الحركة، في الوقت الذي كان فيه عدد كبير من تعليقات القراء يعبر عن مشاعر سلبية تجاه طائفة معينة. كما أظهرت النتائج أن تعليقات القراء كانت تتصف بالانتماء العرقي والسياسي إلى مجلس التعاون الخليجي، بغض النظر عن البعد الجغرافي للقراء، كما هو الحال في مثال جمهورية مصر العربية.

توصي الدراسة بأن هذه النتائج تبين بوضوح أن الفضاء العام العربي عبر الشائكة، يوفر حرية أكبر في التعبير دون خوف من الرقابة أو العقاب، لكنه في الوقت نفسه، يزيد من الغضب والتوتر الطائفي في المجتمعات العربية. الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليقات القراء، الساحة العامة عبر الشائكة، التعليقات الطائفية، دول عربية، حرية التعبير.

* أستاذ مشارك، قسم الإعلام، كلية الآداب، جامعة الكويت. husain.murad@ku.edu.kw

** أستاذ مشارك، قسم الإعلام، كلية الآداب والعلوم، جامعة الخليج للعلوم والتكنولوجيا، دولة الكويت. dashti.a@gust.edu.kw

*** مساعد علمي، قسم الإعلام، كلية الآداب، جامعة الكويت. ahmad2.dashti@ku.edu.kw

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The Social Movement in Bahrain in 2011 and the Sectarian Dimension in Electronic Comments^(*)

Husain Abbas Murad^{*}

Ali Abdulsamad Dashti^{**}

Ahmad Abdulrahman Dashti^{***}

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the comments of news readers on related electronic websites concerning topics published in newspapers from Gulf Arab countries and another Arab state. The research problem is linked to the social movement in Bahrain during 2011, which led to significant variation in opinions and comments. The research method followed a content analysis of 124 news articles appearing on the first page of the Al Watan, Al Riyadh, and Al-Ahram online newspapers, in their reporting of Bahrain's social movement of 2011. These articles comprised 30 news items from Al Watan, 20 from Al Riyadh, and 19 from Al-Ahram totalling 1,929 individual comments in response to news about the social movement in Bahrain. The results indicate that the vast majority of these comments were against the movement, with a considerable number expressing negative feelings towards a specific sect. Furthermore, the results show that readers' comments exhibited racial and political affiliation to the Gulf Cooperation Council, regardless of geographical dimension, as seen in the case of the Arab Republic of Egypt. The study concludes that these findings suggest the Arab online public sphere provides greater freedom of expression without fear of censorship or punishment, yet it also exacerbates sectarian anger and tension in Arab societies..

Keywords: readers' comments, online public sphere, sectarian comments, Arab States, free speech.

* Associate Professor, Department of Mass Communications, College of Arts, Kuwait University.
husain.murad@ku.edu.kw

** Associate Professor, Department of Mass Communications, College of Arts and Sciences, Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait, Dashti.a@gust.edu.kw

*** Scientific Assistant, Department of Mass Communications, , College of Arts, Kuwait University.
ahmad2.dashti@ku.edu.kw

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Introduction

People around the world rely on various digital media outlets for news and information about their communities, society and political issues. The Internet provided convenient access and diverse sources to free information enabling the users to share and comment on news encountering different perspectives (Nielsen et al. 5). The advent of the Internet opened the door for Arabs to explore their region further, while freely expressing their ideas online (Shapiro 1). Anyone who uses a computer or smartphone with an Internet connection can log on to and become immersed in a wide range of different topics or concerns with other cyberspace users. One of the main attributes of online journalism is increased freedom of expression; for example, among Arab online users (Dashti 91). Just as traditional Arab mass media have a substantial history of censorship (Boyd 12), most Arab governments have tried to regulate and control the Internet and in turn, cyberspace discussion (The Global Network 1; Warf 8). However, their efforts have never been completely successful due to the complexity of digital public debate (Dommett and Verovšek 78). Consequently, Arab online journalism has started to enter a public sphere, where opinions, thoughts and ideas can be expressed without fear of censorship (Al-Saggaf 311). Online journalism has provided a new environment for the public to share ideas and express diverse sentiments on forums, blogs, and readers' comment threads on news articles, as well as in chat rooms (Hiem, 2008) structuring the transformation of democratic debate supported with digital design of diverse communities and user knowledgeable behavior (Dommett and Verovšek 100).

The advantage of online interactivity is that it has encouraged many local and international newspapers to shift from traditional print towards online formats, which can be accessed via, smartphone Apps. In this way, they have kept up with the new digital age and the rich diversity of an Internet audience. The Washington Post was the first major U.S. newspaper to allow readers' comments on articles published on its news website (Heim, 2008). Meanwhile, Elaph was the first online Arabic newspaper, based in the United Kingdom. It began allowing its readers to comment and express their opinions freely on any posted news items (Dashti 98). This technological trend impacted the Arab world and led other newspapers to follow suit. In 2007, Alaan was launched as the first Kuwaiti online newspaper to offer its Internet audience interactivity. This was then followed by all 10 remaining Kuwaiti newspapers (Dashti 101). More recently, numerous other online newspapers worldwide have moved onto Smartphone news Apps, with a new pop-up feature for breaking news and news updates. However, the negative social impact of online commenting is also spreading widely. The hate speech that is generated by online comments not only fosters ethnic racism and antagonism, but also has a social and psychological impact, especially among young online users (Dashti et al. 55).

Another historical event should be illustrated in the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq initiated the fall of Saddam Hussein and moving Iraq into a state of chaos (Hinnebusch 31). This led to a migration of some of Iraq's internal problems to neighboring countries.

One of these problems was the growing of sectarian tension in Kuwait, which began to surface in the political arena with increased criticism of oppressed Sunnis by the Shiite and Kurdish majorities in Iraq. This tension migrated to the Arab Gulf States, affecting many aspects of people's daily lives by shaping social interactions, influencing political discourse, and reinforcing sectarian hatred (Robinson et al. 7).

This comparative study on data from 2011, exclusively investigates readers' online comments with sectarian natures, such as phrases, vocabulary, tone, inferences and meaning, thereby capturing public discourse within a specific timeframe. Since the early 2010s, the world has witnessed numerous anti-government protests and uprisings against autocratic governments to become known as Arab Spring. The new media have contributed immensely to the organization and coordination of demonstrations and marches in the region, including in Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Yemen, Tunisia, the Lebanon, Libya and Syria (Khondker 81; Stepanova 2). Published readers' comments indicate a greater openness amongst populations in the region to express their sentiments. This openness potentially creates an environment that is loaded with occasionally offensive sectarian comments or perceived blasphemy. Historically, the war between the Sunnis and Shiites has increased with Iranian influence since 1979, and the fall of Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussain in 2003. Kuwait is one of the nations where sectarianism increased after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and this was reflected in many readers' comments that were posted to online newspapers (Dashti et al. 77).

Online newspapers

For many decades, traditional newspapers have played an important role in mass communication and the formation of public opinion (Dashti 103). However, with the emergence of Internet technology, online newspapers have begun to assume the influence of print. There are numerous reasons why someone might favor online newspapers over traditional print newspapers. Rafaeli (35) states that the one-way communication of print media lacks audience interaction and does not offer any opportunity for readers to express their feelings or opinions. In contrast, online newspapers have attracted an audience via two-way communication, where readers can voice their opinions using different tools such as readers' comments threads. In the past, the only way to gauge public reaction was from letters to the editor, which was usually delayed, because of the time it took for them to appear in print. They were also frequently limited in scope, due to finite print space and editorial censorship. This limited interaction offered by traditional newspapers consequently led audiences to look for alternative spaces to voice their opinions.

In contrast, online newspapers enabled audiences to become active rather than passive. According to Brown (26), the feature of interactivity in online newspapers has given journalists an opportunity to reduce the gap between the news and its readers.

Instead, interactivity with an online audience builds a different picture, using the opinions expressed in the online public sphere. In short, two-way communication allows free expression and interaction between news organizations and readers (Chung 650).

The Positive and Negative Roles of Online Readers' Comments

The printing press was assumed to have brought success to the Protestant Reformation, while the use of fax machines led the Chinese Tiananmen Square demonstrators to congregate and facilitated the Russian coup in 1991. Similarly, in the Middle East, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser used radio broadcasts to gain support for a coup, and cassette tapes of lectures by Imam Khomeini triggered the Iranian Revolution against the Shah (Ghareeb 395). Similarly, the advent of Internet and email technology contributed to the demise of the Suharto regime, while Facebook was the main contributor to the revolution in Egypt in 2011. All these elements demonstrate the power of technology to change the world. In the contemporary context, it is in fact essential to examine readers' comments, so as to be able to weigh up the opinions expressed within them, thereby predicting phenomena or learning about readers' perceptions of specific news content. Moreover, examining readers' comments in response to news articles can prompt news organizations to produce better quality online journalism.

Public Sphere

This study's theoretical framework was informed by public sphere discourse, as presented by the German philosopher Habermas (Calhoun 80). In the public sphere, people set aside their social disparity and become equally empowered citizens as they discuss day-to-day issues to achieve mutual agreement (Habermas 10). The Internet provides an ideal forum for this public dialogue. The phenomenon of readers' comments has therefore been studied from different theoretical perspectives, such as agenda-setting, uses, and gratification, in order to analyze the effects of these comments on public opinion in general (Diakopoulos and Naaman 42; Erjavec 63; Martin 25; Siakalli et al. 2). The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Habermas's discourse on the public sphere (Calhoun 82), which is itself derived from the 18th century Enlightenment concept of the "public sphere." Within this context, salons and coffeehouses functioned as critical venues where the bourgeoisie and various social strata could engage in discourse on contemporary issues alongside the elite, thereby contributing to processes of social transformation (Calhoun 87).

According to Habermas, the public sphere is a space for social, rather than physical life, where people of different social classes, genders or races can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems. It is a balanced space, where

issues of common interest may be discussed in order to reach a mutual viewpoint or understanding. Normally these discussions produce public opinion that affect political action (Calhoun, 1993). The readers' comments sections in online newspapers serve as active spaces for public dialogue and engagement, where anyone can read news articles of common interest, and freely post their opinions on the issues outlined within them (Manosevitch and Walker 2).

Readers' comments in online newspapers offer a very small public sphere, forming part of the dominant public sphere, where citizens have an equal opportunity to discuss and voice their opinions. Therefore, this study examines the impact of readers' comments in the online public sphere to see whether the comments that follow each news article demonstrate mutual interest, or merely serve to intensify sectarian tension in Kuwait through their profane sectarianism. This approach is likely to be fruitful, because an Arab online public, especially in the public sphere of the Gulf region, has emerged over the past two decades offering a different perspective, since the nations being investigated are either semi- or non-democratic. Unfortunately, many GCC governments -including Kuwait- adopted new laws dealing with online activities which forced many newspapers to stop their online comments or many online users stopped commenting online fearing of legal consequences (Hakmeh 1). Thus, public sphere theory provides a fit frame work for this study to elaborate on how Arabism ideology can affect online readers' behavior through their anger and hatred rather than using public sphere as an arena of free balanced discussions.

Many newspapers worldwide have launched their own websites, with forums for online comment. These forums invite readers to participate in discussion with news staff or other online readers (Nielsen 2012). This online interactive feature allows readers an opportunity to express their opinions on various political issues. Unfiltered readers' comments on online news articles and user-to-user interactivity have transformed readers' notions of public opinion. For example, Lee (5) conducted a survey on undergraduate students to examine the effect of online readers' comments on social reality. It was subsequently concluded that readers' comments have some influence on public opinion, provided that the news corresponds to its reporting. Meanwhile, Al-Saggaf (315) examined the content of readers' comments on the Al-Arabiya news site, prior to the 2003 Iraq War. It was found that some Arab readers' insights, criticisms, ideas, and opinions of Al-Arabiya's content affected other readers' perceptions of certain controversial issues. Furthermore, a study conducted on the impact of comments from Al Jazeera readers found that this active commenting made a dynamic contribution to the news-making process (Abdul-Mageed 59). The advantage of readers' comments enriching the online public sphere is that they can provide a significant amount of factual information. They also demonstrate a public process of weighing up different perspectives through freedom of expression, regarding individual positions and reasoning grounds (Friemel and Dötsch 152; Manosevitch and Walker 6).

Anonymity is another factor that may help trigger hatred discussions among online readers. Scott who used anonymous by-line in his paper for illustrative purposes defined anonymity as a “the degree to which a communicator perceives the message source is unknown and unspecified” (387) adding that anonymity helps individuals to reveal information when talking to strangers. Conversely, the anonymity of readers’ comments gives rise to a degree of negativity, especially in terms of fairness and accountability. The fact that online users’ real names are not used can provide the motivation for them to post comments containing racial slurs, stereotypes, or profanity in relation to sensitive issues (Post 4). Various types of negativity and uncivil behavior associated with anonymous comments can subsequently cause online comment features to be shut down on news sites. Likewise, allowing anonymous comments can foster a public sphere filled with anger, hate, and distrust (Heim 1). This is the kind of behavior that led The Washington Post to shut down its readers’ comments in January 2006, as many comments were profane and hateful (Ives 1). Aharony (841) research on three online newspapers’ of readers’ comments concluded that anonymity has the power flaming the expression of hostile emotions. In their meta-analysis examining the relationship between anonymity and online self-disclosure commonly referred to as the online disinhibition effect, Clark-Gordon et al. (109) reinforce previous findings that anonymity is positively correlated with mediated self-disclosure, which can occur with equal or even greater intensity and intimacy compared to face-to-face interactions.

Proximity

A potentially valuable feature of the news is its proximity or nearness, meaning that the closer the news is to the people, the more value and interest it will have to them. Thus, the localization of news is more important than its geographic proximity for shaping people’s perceptions of the news itself (Morton and Warren 1024). Goyanes (18) conducted a national survey on 1,637 participants in Spain, measuring news proximity and people’s willingness to pay for online local news. It was subsequently found that demographics, media use, news interest and traditional newspaper subscription predicted a strong relationship with people’s willingness to pay attention to local news. Furthermore, the above study found that local news had a greater influence on the older population, compared to the younger generation. Another predictor of proximity is cultural proximity, which is an “appealing notion that people will gravitate toward media from their own culture” (Ksiazek and Webster 485). Straubhaar (78) cites factors such as humor, gender, language, culture, image, dress, lifestyle, knowledge, ethnic type, religion, and values as shaping cultural proximity.

Bahrain’s Social Movement of 2011

The Pearl Roundabout Revolution, as it is referred to by local Bahrainis, took place on February 14, 2011. It consisted of a series of civil resistance demonstrations against

the Bahraini government. It was therefore similar to other Arab Spring social movements in the Middle East, following the suicide of Mohammad Boazizi in Tunisia as a protest against poverty, which ignited the Arab Spring. The Bahraini uprising was aimed at achieving equality and political freedom for the Bahrain's Shiite majority. After the police raid on the Pearl Roundabout on February 17, which resulted in the death of several demonstrators, the stakes grew higher, with demands to end the rule of King Hamad.

The Pearl Roundabout was the center for protesters camping in Manama, Bahrain's capital. The site parallels that of the Al Tahreer Roundabout in Egypt. One month later, the Bahraini government called for military support from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), declaring a state of emergency (Abdo and Ali 2). The police response was described by human rights organizations as a very violent crackdown on peaceful and unarmed protestors, including doctors, medical staff, human rights activists, and bloggers (Human Rights Watch 2). For example, the police launched nightly raids on Shiite neighborhoods, fired plastic bullets randomly at women and young children, beat innocent civilians at checkpoints, and refused to offer medical help to the injured (Human Rights Watch 3). However, these news reports failed to elicit worldwide support, as the mainstream media in Bahrain and the other Gulf States began implying that Iran was concocting the whole scenario to justify invading Bahrain, especially as Iran had supported the Shiite social movement from the beginning of the crisis (Abdo and Ali 4). Hence, Oman's media coverage of Bahrain's crisis had more balanced and no implication of sectarianism or other rational hatred among Gulf States (Dashti et al. 287).

Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt

This study targets two closely situated countries in the Gulf region (Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) and one located in Africa (Egypt). The first two were selected, because of their physical closeness to the situation, although they have different political systems. The third country was selected as a proximate location, which had already experienced an uprising in 2011.

Kuwait's semi-democracy dates back to the country's independence in 1961. Its 1962 Constitution later guaranteed freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and gender equality (Freedom House 1). These essential rules have remained in place to ensure democracy until this present time, evolving into greater freedom and more democratic and civilized debate among Kuwaitis. Democracy in Kuwait was further strengthened by recent moves to enable women to become more active in the political arena by voting and contesting in elections for the National Assembly (Dashti and Alfadhli 35; Dashti and Mesbah 276).

The population of Kuwait reached 4,918,570 in August 2024 (just 1,559,925 of this number being Kuwaitis) (PACI 1). Out of this local Kuwaiti population, 70 percent

are Sunni and 30 percent are Shiite. It should also be noted, however, that Kuwait has the largest illiterate workforce in the GCC, standing at 7.3 percent at the time of conducting this study (Saleh 1). Moreover, there were 4.29 million Internet users as of February 2024, with a 99.0% penetration rate (Kemp "Digital 2024: Kuwait" 1) with numerous students at both public and private universities utilizing distance learning (Murad et al. (282). Aside from this, the privatization of the media in Kuwait has opened the door for several sectarian newspapers and television stations to operate. For instance, there are seven Shiite television stations and one newspaper. This is due to the Kuwaiti government instituting its press law in 2006, which embraced long-term rights of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, while prohibiting the publication of any slur against God, Islam or the Amir, and any incitement to dissolve power (Alkazemi et al. 13). Likewise, a few years ago, the Kuwaiti government issued new laws on cyberspace, censoring online freedom. This resulted in Kuwait being ranked 108 worldwide for freedom of the press (Reporters Without Borders 1).

Similarly, the government of Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, with a population of 33,091,113 million, the majority of whom are Sunni (85-90%). A small percentage of the Saudi population is made up of Shiites (10-15%), who mainly reside in the country's eastern region (CIA 1). The Kingdom was the last of the Gulf States to allow its population Internet access, due to concerns about the effects of new technology on the public. Internet use has since grown dramatically, reaching a total of 34.84 million users as of January 2022, with an 97.9% penetration rate (Kemp "Digital 2022: Saudi Arabia").

In January 2011, Egypt experienced an Arab Spring uprising and its President was ousted from power to be replaced by a civilian government. However, it was not long before a new government had overthrown this civilian government by means of military support, meaning that the nation is currently ruled by former military personnel. Today, the population of Egypt totals 113.6 million. As of February 2024, 82.01 million of its inhabitants were Internet users, with a 72.2% penetration rate (Kemp "Digital 2024: Egypt" 1). There is no official number cited for Egypt's Shiite population, because the government does not distinguish between Muslims by sect. However, it is estimated that this number is somewhere between 800,000 and two million (Minority Rights Group International 1). The history of Shiites in Egypt dates back to 969 A.H., when the Fatimid dynasty ruled the nation for 200 years, establishing Cairo as its capital city. Sectarian tensions against Shiites rose up in Egypt with the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and Egypt's peace agreement with Israel, under which Shiite practices were restricted and considered a threat to national stability (Minority Rights Group International 2).

The purpose of this study is to compare readers' sectarian online comments on stories about the Bahraini social movement of 2011. The comments selected were drawn from three Arab online newspapers. The researchers used the democratic public sphere to conceptualize and analyze the content of these published readers'

comments, relating to the political issues surrounding Bahrain's social movement. One hypothesis and three research questions were posed to analyze the following factors: individual statements of political affiliation, features of individual sentiments, the use of profanity or sectarian words targeting certain groups, negative and positive statements, and the role of proximity in shaping individual comments during Bahrain's social movement in 2011.

H1: Al-Ahram readers' comments will more likely support Bahrain's movement against the government.

RQ1: How do readers characterize the political similarity of the Gulf State countries and Egypt in their comments on Bahrain's situation? What do their comments reveal about political allegiances?

RQ2: Do the readers' comments share common sentiments regarding Bahrain's social movement? This research question measures individual statements of opinion, regarding Bahrain's social movement in 2011 and whether the sentiments were positive or negative.

RQ3: Do readers in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt use profanity in their social movement on events in Bahrain?

The **RQ1** was formulated to enquire whether political allegiance was important to the online news readers and whether they were for or against the GCC. The GCC was established in 1984 between Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar. This Council looks after the security of these Arab Gulf countries with the notion of shared vision and destiny. Three categories define the allegiances and non-allegiances of the Gulf countries, as well as other unknown areas.

Meanwhile, the objective of **RQ2** was to discover readers' opinions and ideas regarding the social movement in Bahrain. Each comment was read and then coded according to three categories: those in favor of the movement, those against the movement, and those with no specified position. Finally, **RQ3** was designed to examine individual statements in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where profanity was used in response to Bahrain's social movement in 2011. Profanity may be defined as foul or offensive language; in this case, especially relating to sectarian, racial or ethnic issues. It is a matter of importance, because of its divisive potential, and its reflection of real sentiments by those who use it.

Methodology

This qualitative content analysis study is aimed to study readers' sectarian online comments appeared on stories related to Bahraini social movement of 2011. This

method of analysis is particularly important for this study because what is needed is a systematic replicable process to draw realistic conclusions (Bengtsson 10; Stemler 2). When conducting online content analysis, the researchers should consider these factors such as sampling, unitization, categorization and coding (Weare and Lin 273). The online newspapers selected for this study were Al Watan (Kuwait - 1974), Al Riyadh (Saudi Arabia - 1965) and Al-Ahram (Egypt - 1875); specifically, their news coverage on the 2011 social movement in Bahrain. The reasons selecting these three online newspapers because they are considered to be among the oldest and most influential in their respective countries with a high readership and ranking top 10 online newspapers of the Arab world (Forbes 2). Likewise, this selection was based on several factors: (1) online comments archived accessibility, (2) Arab States, (3) proximity, and (4) Shiite's existence in all three countries. In addition, Egypt had a successful social movement and known as the leader of Arabism in the region. The timeframe of this analysis was from February 17, 2011 to November 17, 2011, which coincided with two important events: the start of the Bahraini social movement in 2011, and the Arab Spring in Egypt.

The Sample

Systematic samples of 124 news articles were selected from the Al Watan, Al Riyadh, and Al-Ahram online newspaper archives. The procedure adopted was similar to the selection of a sampling random sample, which several researchers have endorsed as effective because of its ability to minimize bias and ensure representativeness (Wimmer and Dominick 88). The plan was to look at 124 news articles appearing on the first page of the Al Watan, Al Riyadh, and Al-Ahram online newspapers, in their reporting of Bahrain's social movement of 2011. These articles comprised 30 news items from Al Watan, 20 from Al Riyadh, and 19 from Al-Ahram, totaling 1,929 readers' comments. All these comments were first listed in the sample, with the one rule that each news article should have elicited at least 10 comments, in order to be analyzed. The sample of readers' comments was then saved in HTML and Word documents. However, the news articles themselves were not included in the analysis.

Coding Procedure

Two trained coders (mass media graduates) and two authors of this study helped collect online comments regarding stories that appeared in the selected newspapers. During the collection period coding and rules were created based upon reading all the online readers' comments among the coders, modified and unrelated news were either eliminated or selected. The coding included words or phrases indicating political allegiance, either for or against the movement, positive comments, analysis of sectarian, and profane content from all three online newspapers. The inter-coder reliability results showed that the coders had overall agreement that ranged from .76

to .80 for Cohen's kappa and the average k was .78. Content analysis was found to be an efficient way of investigating the content of media (Wimmer and Dominick 158) while clarity of language and a well-defined coding system were considered during the coding because of their vital importance to obtain reliable findings in conducting content analysis (Weber 40) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Coding

Phrase	Characteristics		
Political Alliance	Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)	Non-GCC	Unknown
Sentiments expressed in readers' comments on the Bahrain social movement	Pro-social movement	Anti-social movement	Unknown
Positivity and negativity in readers' comments, which add to interactivity in the public sphere	Positive comment	Negative comment	Neutral
Profane comments	Any words displaying disrespect for race, ethnicity, or sectarian and religious beliefs		

Findings

The purpose of this study was to compare individual statements made by online readers in response to news articles on the Bahraini social movement of 2011. The sampled statements appeared in two online newspapers in the Gulf States: Al Watan, Al Riyadh, and Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram. A total of 1,929 individual statements were analyzed, these being readers' online responses to articles that appeared on the front page of each of the selected online newspapers. In total, 874 individual statements were sampled from 30 articles in the Al Watan online newspaper, 790 were sampled from 25 articles in the Al Riyadh online newspaper, and 265 were sampled from 19 articles in the Al-Ahram online newspaper.

RQ1 provided descriptive statistics, consisting of percentages and frequencies to indicate the political alliances of these readers. A significant number of individual statements: 94 percent ($n = 1,819$) displayed political affiliation to the Arab Gulf States, while only seven percent indicated no allegiance to the GCC, and two percent of the sample did not indicate any particular political affiliation, thereby represented as 'unknown' in this study. Meantime, RQ2 was designed to ascertain whether these readers' opinions were in favor of or against the movement, and whether they were positive or negative. Three options were specified: support the social movement, disapprove the social movement, and 'not known'. The data showed that a high percentage of the statements: a high percentage

of the statements, 84 percent (n=1,629), indicated disapproval of the Bahraini social movement, while only 16 percent revealed support (n=309). Furthermore, the individual statements were analyzed according to three categories: positive opinions, negative opinions, and 'not known'. The data revealed that a significant number of statements (74 percent) demonstrated negative sentiments (n=1,436), while the proportion of positive statements totalled 17 percent (n=325), and the remaining nine percent revealed neither positive nor negative opinions.

Finally, RQ3 enquired whether readers in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt used profanity in their comments on Bahrain's 2011 social movement. The use of profanity in comments would include sectarian words, mockery of religious beliefs, and racism. Twenty-two sectarian words and phrases were consequently found in the analysis. Using percentage and frequency, the data showed a significant number of statements: 65 percent (n=1,259), which labeled Shiites and Iran as the main source of the problem of the social movement. The statements contained profane language of different kinds to describe Shiites, such as 'Iranian tails', 'Shiite Loyalists to Iran', 'Furs or Persians', 'Rawafith' (Deniers) or 'Majus' (see Table 2).

Table 2: Use of profanity in the statements, by frequency and percentages in the selected Kuwait', Saudi and Egyptian newspapers (n=1929)

Words	Frequency	Percentage	Words	Frequency	Percentage
Shiite	509	26%	Magus	79	4%
Iranian origins, Furs	314	16.2%	Wipe out Shiites	78	4%
Iranian Loyalist	228	11.8%	Iranian agents	74	3.8%
Iranian Tails (betrayers)	242	12.5%	Iranian agenda	45	2.3%
Sunni	182	9.4%	Turbans (Shiite)	61	3.1%
God with Sunni	175	9%	Hypocrites	24	1.2%
Rawafith (Shiite)	150	7.7%	Safawi	14	0.7%
U.S. plot	110	5.7%	Satanic regime	12	0.6%
Iranian domination	109	5.6%	Tyrannous	5	0.2%
Missionaries	92	4.7%	Khomeini Tails	5	0.2%
Shiites are Israelis	79	4%	Liars	2	0.1%

It was found that there were more negative statements in the Al Riyadh online newspaper than in either Al Watan or Al-Ahram. Conversely, more positive statements appeared in Al Watan and Al-Ahram, displaying positive language such as 'protesting', 'revolution', 'majority', 'martyrs', 'invaded' and 'freedom fighters'.

Discussions and Conclusion

Proximity in H1 is one of the factors affecting users' opinions (Weiss 49; Westerståhl and Johansson 73). However, in this study, news proximity did not appear to have any effect on the opinions of Al-Ahram online readers, regarding the Bahrain social movement, whereupon most of the statements supported local government against the up-risers. Despite the recent Arab Spring uprising, which resulted in the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, the majority of online comments from Egyptians were in support of the Bahraini government intercepting Bahrain's social movement. This is evidence of the effect of cultural proximity as a predictor of readers' perceptions. In this case, Arabism and nationalism were the two components of that phenomenon (Straubhaar 79). Thus, it was most likely to have been the negative media coverage and troubled history of Egyptian-Iranian relations, following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which caused negative perceptions to fester amongst Egyptian readers online. Therefore, H1 was not supported in this study.

The analysis of RQ1 data from 94 percent of the individual statements revealed political affiliations to the Arab Gulf States, such as support for the GCC. These statements reflected the enduring concerns of the Arab Gulf States, such as fear of Iranian Shiite domination in the region, facilitated by Arab Shiite citizens of the GCC countries (for example, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE). This implies that Arab unity is still strong, manifested in online readers' perceptions, with strong loyalty toward their political systems. The results of analyzing data generated by the second RQ2 showed that most of the statements opposed any kind of social movement, due to the socio-economic prosperity of the oil-rich countries of the Arabian Gulf, especially where it was labeled as a 'Shiite movement' within a Sunni political system. This is a statement of fact, but Bahrain is the only country in the Persian Gulf that does not offer a prosperous lifestyle to its Shiite majority. Instead, expatriates are more privileged, due to a political agenda to increase Bahrain's Sunni population (ADHRB 7). Furthermore, the RQ3 indicated a high level of sectarian profanity among the online readers' comments. This profanity could be interpreted as a prevailing negative reaction to the image of Iranians presented by the media, relating to the historical Revolution of 1979, the war against Iran in 1981, the ambition to acquire nuclear technology, several calls to annex Bahrain as an Iranian province, and the occupation of Abu Moosa in the UAE over the previous 10 years. All these points appeared to have contributed immensely to the negative perception of Iran in the Gulf States. The negative comments against Iran from Arab neighbors are typical reaction due to the fear and concern over Iranian domination.

Interestingly, a comparison between comments from three of the online newspapers revealed that Al Riyadh displayed more negative sentiments than Al Watan or Al-Ahram. This is possibly due to two main factors: Saudi Arabia is not a democratic country, but rather has a strict Sunni population, with a high level of government censorship in the online public sphere. A user can even be imprisoned if violates government rules. In addition, the results indicated that individual online comments are generally biased, with pre-judgments

of issues related to the Bahrain social movement of 2011. However, the negative tone of these statements is considered to be a characteristic of free speech and expression, which the online public sphere uniquely provides for its users. These results imply that the online public sphere allows individuals more freedom to express their ideas and thoughts, without fear of consequences. This is a critical indication of the power of the online public sphere and interactivity, which could become a new contributor to Arab social movements.

Online comment threads have provided a new avenue for free speech, but since the Arab online public sphere is still in its infancy, there were some negative consequences. The main objective of the online public sphere is to provide a space for people to share opinions and ideas freely, without the hatred, profanity or rudeness regarding religion or beliefs, which unfortunately characterize the online public sphere in most Persian Gulf States. In general, the study revealed that most of the statements were prejudiced and based on biased perceptions. For example, the fear of Iranian domination meant that individual comments sought refuge in perceiving the Arab Gulf States as a unified secure zone.

Many of the sectarian statements were directed specifically against Shiites, using labels such as 'Iranian Tails' and 'Iranian Loyalists'. Such negative statements promote and aggravate sectarianism in the online public sphere, which then migrates into the wider society. Their effect is illustrated in online calls to the streets from certain Kuwaiti Islamic groups, demonstrating the immense power of the online public sphere. This could therefore be a new way in which social movements erupt in future. Moreover, Arabs tend to use readers' comments as an arena for venting their anger and hatred, rather than accessing a physical public sphere to discuss issues, whereupon social change could be brought about through mutual exchange. Furthermore, historically Arab States mainly ruled by non-democratic political systems which brought fear among their citizens to express their views freely. Online public sphere diminished this offline fear to more free dialogue and expression in cyberspace, especially with the feature of anonymity. The disclosure of the identity encourages people to express their views freely in public sphere, however, this freedom fostered racial slurs, sectarian comments, hatred, and transforming the bad norms of the offline society to online public sphere. In addition, this study shows that the feature of proximity in social movements is not valid when encountered with Arabism ideology among online readers' comments.

The findings of this study resonate with earlier research on the complex interplay of online news media, public discourse, and sociopolitical dynamics. The prevalence of sectarian language and negative sentiments towards the Bahraini uprising aligns with Dashti et al.'s (249) observations on the rise of sectarian tensions in online comments following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The study's focus on the role of proximity in shaping online comments also echoes earlier research by Goyanes (1516) and Morton and Warren (1023), who highlighted the importance of geographic and cultural proximity in influencing news consumption and perception.

However, the study's findings also diverge from some established theoretical frameworks. While Habermas's concept of the public sphere envisions a space for rational and inclusive debate, the analysis of online comments revealed a predominance of biased perceptions, prejudice, and a lack of genuine dialogue. This suggests that the online public sphere, at least in the context of the Bahraini uprising, may not be fulfilling its idealized role as a forum for democratic deliberation. The study's findings also challenge the traditional notion of proximity, as Al-Ahram readers in Egypt, despite being geographically distant from Bahrain, expressed strong opinions largely aligned with those in the Gulf States. This underscores the powerful influence of cultural and ideological factors, such as Arabism and nationalism, in shaping online discourse, even across geographical boundaries.

The study's exploration of the impact of anonymity on online commenting behavior further contributes to existing literature on online disinhibition and self-disclosure. While anonymity can facilitate open expression, it can also foster negativity and uncivil behavior, as evidenced by the prevalence of profanity and sectarian language in the comments. This finding supports Aharony's (833) research, which highlighted the potential for anonymity to amplify hostile emotions in online discussions.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of online public discourse in the context of a sociopolitical crisis in the Arab world. The findings highlight the complex interplay of factors such as proximity, political allegiance, anonymity, and media framing in shaping online comments. While the online public sphere offers a platform for free expression, it also poses challenges in terms of fostering genuine dialogue and combating prejudice and hate speech.

Future Studies

A fruitful area of exploration into online newspapers in the public sphere within the Gulf States would be to explore their interactivity, and the sharing of ideas via this avenue among Gulf Arabs. Further studies could look at Arab perceptions of civil online interaction and its role in developing the Arab public sphere dimensions in comparison with online public sphere.

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