News values on social media: News organizations' Facebook use

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Abstract

This study examines the news selection practices followed by news organizations through investigating the news posted on social networking sites and, in particular, the Facebook pages of four foreign Arabic language TV stations: The Iranian Al-Alam TV, Russia Today, Deutsche Welle, and BBC. A total of 15,589 news stories are analyzed in order to examine the prominence of references to countries and political actors. The study reveals that social significance and proximity as well as the news organizations' ideological agenda are the most important elements that dictate the news selection process.

Keywords

Facebook, news organizations, news production, online news, social media, social networking sites

Introduction

This study deals with the news dissemination practice on social networking sites (SNSs), which is a largely under-researched topic despite its importance and relevance in today's world. Another important aspect of the study is that it empirically tests the news selection process in relation to references to countries and political actors linked to newsworthiness like the relevance of ideology, social significance, and proximity. In this regard, the criteria followed in news selection are all part of the news values theory, as will be explained below. References to countries and political actors provide an indication of the

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general tendencies of ideologically diverse news organizations toward political coverage. Furthermore, the study provides a cross-national comparative perspective through the investigation of the news articles posted by the Iranian Al-Alam TV, the Russia Today (RT), the German Deutsche Welle (DW), and the BBC.

All the above channels are very different in nature, yet they have one thing in common which is the use of Arabic language. Since the 9/11 events, there has been a growing interest by many foreign governments to disseminate media messages to the Arab masses, especially with the use of national cultural industries like television (Straubhaar, 1991). Snow and Taylor (2006) assert that the 'war on terror is essentially a global struggle for hearts and minds, and the media are the principal channels for winning the argument' (p. 400). As a result, many satellite TV channels emerged to target the Arab world with long hours of Arabic language programs (Lahlali, 2011). It is estimated that over 1 billion dollars were spent up to mid-2013 on running a single Arabic language channel, Al-Hurra TV, which is owned by the US government (Seib, 2013: 11). It seems that the majority of these channels gained popularity because they offer news insights into events taking place around the world and sometimes cover important issues and topics in the Arab region in an attempt to compete with other Pan-Arab channels like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya (El-Nawawy, 2006). Also, most of these channels provide platforms for Arab audiences to participate and debate issues such as the case of BBC Arabic (Hill and Alshaer, 2010), and many of them have gained credibility due to the timely and professional manner by which news is produced (Al-Jaber and Gunter, 2013; Elareshi and Gunter, 2012). Indeed, these channels are used as tools for public diplomacy by serving the various economic, cultural, and political interests as well as the foreign policies of the non-Arab governments that run them 'as part of the ongoing political rivalry in the region' (Hill and Alshaer, 2010; Mellor et al., 2011: 96).

Facebook that has been chosen for this news investigation, for this online platform, has become a very important SNS tool for reading and commenting on news. Online users consume more news on Facebook-recommended pages than on Twitter, especially after introducing the Facebook Social Reader (Mitchell and Rosenstiel, 2012). Although the survey deals with the US audience, it is important to mention the results of a Pew study here because it can provide general insight into audiences' media habits in other regions. According to this study, about 30 percent of Facebook users get their news on this platform which is higher than any other SNSs such as YouTube (10%) and Twitter (8%) (Pew Research – Journalism Project, 2013). When SNS users like a Facebook page of a news organization, they begin receiving its news feeds, which is a new form of news subscription (Ju et al., 2013: 4).

In the following literature review, a discussion of the theoretical concept of news values and ideologies as well as news organizations' SNS use is presented because they are directly linked to the focus of this study. First, the literature on news values provides the main theoretical background in which this study is situated as it deals with the news selection process of several news organizations. The other area covered in the literature review is ambient journalism or news organizations' SNS use. In particular, this study investigates the news selection process on SNSs which is another under-researched area in journalism and media studies. By examining the literature on news values, we find that

the majority of previous studies focus on traditional media outlets rather than their social media platforms; hence, exploring this can help in further understanding the news selection agendas of these news organizations.

Literature review

Since this study deals with the concept of news values, it is important to begin the discussion with one of the first studies in this field. This research relies on the pioneering study of Galtung and Ruge's (1965) taxonomy of news as well as on Harcup and O'Neill's (2001) follow-up study which proposes a number of news values criteria, including the power elite, celebrity, entertainment, surprise, bad news, good news, magnitude, relevance, follow up, and newspaper agenda (see also Brighton and Foy, 2007). Here, the political and cultural dimensions are linked to the ideology that is relevant to this study.

In their hierarchical model of news values, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) explain that news is influenced by several factors including routine newsroom practices and ideological values adhered by journalists and their news organization. In their more developed theory of news values, Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) focus on the elements of deviance intensity and social significance to explain newsworthiness. The former is classified into three main types: statistical, social change, and normative, while the latter is defined as 'relevance for the social system' in relation to four dimensions: political, economic, cultural, and public (pp. 7, 15, and 49). In the two models above, there is a clear focus on the impact of the relevant context and ideological values on newsworthiness as they apparently encompass political and religious attitudes and stances that can explain the newsworthiness measures followed by some news organizations.

Furthermore, Adams (1986) examines how proximity in the news can be an important indicator of newsworthiness especially in terms of economic, political, and cultural ties which connect nations together. This seems to be related to people's beliefs and general interests. Cohen et al. (1990) refer to a similar concept which is called psychological proximity in the sense that people have 'zones of relevance' which they use to determine the relevance or importance of news to their lives. This, of course, applies to journalists' decisions in the news selection process as these zones of relevance can be of various kinds, like sharing certain political, religious, or cultural beliefs and values. In other words, some countries or nations tend to be newsworthy for those with which their audiences share similar ideologies and cultural values.

Indeed, news organizations must be influenced by certain ideologies. In this regard, Thompson (1990) emphasizes that ideology is a 'meaning in the service of power' (p. 7) which can explain how news organizations can sometimes become tools used by their owners to convey certain messages. This is in line with Herman and Chomsky's (2008) propaganda model in which one of the main news filters is media ownership. On the other hand, journalists themselves must be influenced by their own ideology even if they have not noticed it. Stuart Hall (1985) affirms that journalists are 'inscribed by an ideology to which they do not consciously commit themselves, and which, instead, "writes them"' (p. 101). What is evident here is that the influence of the ideological background cannot be overlooked in understanding the news selection process.

News organizations and use of SNSs

Before the introduction of SNSs, news organizations realized the need to change their traditional one-way communication strategy by giving viewers the freedom to comment on news and sometimes allowing them to customize the online platforms into their own preferences (Chung, 2008; Chung and Yoo, 2008); some news organizations also published readers' comments in the print version (McElroy, 2013). This was one of the first steps taken by media outlets to broaden their readership. Later, several news organizations created multimedia platforms in which the news experience is characterized by three main features: portable, personalized, and participatory (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). Some of the interactive features provided by news organizations included creating discussion groups, blogs, and forums (Boczkowski, 1999; Schultz, 2000), which is called a 'demassified forms of feedback' (Lievrouw, 2001: 21). All the above interactive tools enable journalists to interact with their readers, on one hand, and readers can exchange their opinions among themselves, on the other hand (Constantinescu and Tedesco, 2007: 449). Also, many newspapers and TV stations provide hyperlinks to other topics and stories by which journalists are able to change the news frame that 'emphasizes broader social and political themes' since the '[e]xpanded framing may prove central to re-engaging an increasingly distrusting and alienated citizenry in a 21st Century democracy' (Pavlik, 2001: 320). This new phenomenon can be called news organizations 2.0.

There are several studies that examine the comments sections of news sites by, for example, content analysis (Abdul-Mageed, 2008; McCluskey and Hmielowski, 2012), but there are only a few empirical studies that investigated the content of news stories posted on news organizations' SNS channels. Having realized the growing significance of social media, news organizations are involved more than ever in them, viewing services like Facebook and Twitter 'as opportunities to market and distribute content' (Hermida et al., 2012; see also Arceneaux and Weiss, 2010). Messner et al. (2011) found in their study that 81 percent of the US TV stations had Facebook pages in 2009 which changed into 100 percent in 2010 (pp. 14–15). What is important here is that news is read and shared much more than before as it has become a social experience (Redden and Witschge, 2010: 181). Hermida (2010) calls this phenomenon 'ambient journalism' which refers to social information networks that provide an 'asynchronous, lightweight and always-on communication system ... enabling citizens to maintain a mental model of news and events around them' (p. 301). Goode (2009) stresses that news stories are being 'amplified, sustained and potentially morphed as they are re-circulated, reworked, and reframed by online networks' (p. 1293).

In fact, many news organizations implemented social media guidelines for their employees and hired social media specialists due to their importance in maintaining the image and identity as well as enhancing the public relations efforts of these news organizations (Ju et al., 2013: 1; Morton, 2010; Muralidharan et al., 2011: 228; Steyn et al., 2010). Among the first TV stations that used Facebook to enhance its news dissemination was ABC News which officially partnered in 2007 with Facebook to allow its users to 'electronically follow ABC reporters, view reports and video and participate in polls and debates, all within a new "U.S. Politics" category' (Stelter, 2007). Also, CNN, for

example, employed around 150 employees to tweet the news by the fall of 2008 (Garrison-Sprenger, 2008), and it created the 'Facebook Connect' service to increase online audiences and make them more connected (Emmett, 2009). Most commonly, news organizations would share hyperlinks to stories posted online in order to direct traffic from SNSs to their own websites wherein users can also comment using their Facebook and Google+ accounts (Goodman, 2013: 48; Ju et al., 2013: 1). In this way, the news contents can be disseminated 'virally' (Stelter, 2007, para. 11). Furthermore, SNSs have offered solutions to news organizations that are less problematic and costly than the comments section which usually contains a great deal of incivility (Howell, 2007). Braun and Gillespie (2011) call SNSs 'digital intermediaries' because of their practical functions.

Finally, it is important to note that SNS newsreaders are not always engaged or interested in everything posted by the news organization despite the fact that they follow its Twitter or Facebook pages. For example, when NPR posted a controversial story on its Facebook page during April Fools' Day, many online readers commented on it by reading the headline only rather than reading the full story which was merely a prank (Dickson, 2014; NPR, 2014). This example sheds light on the kind of weak involvement some online readers have with news mostly due to time constraints. Yet, this phenomenon is not confined to news stories posted on SNS outlets as previous studies have shown similar tendencies when it comes to print and online media (Garcia et al., 1991; Holmqvist et al., 2003).

In order to cover some of the overlooked aspects of news values decisions followed by news organizations, this research study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. In relation to the news selection process, what is the dominance of news stories in relation to references to countries posted on the Facebook pages of the four TV channels?

RQ2. In relation to the news selection process, what is the dominance of news stories in relation to references to political actors posted on the Facebook pages of the four TV channels?

Method

For the purpose of the study, a webometric tool called NVivo 10 – NCapture was used to mine the Facebook posts of the following Arabic language TV channels: Al-Alam TV (Iranian), RT (Russian), DW (German), and BBC (British) in late February 2014. These channels have been chosen because they represent a broad spectrum of foreign channels broadcasting to the Arab world in Arabic language, so it is highly important to compare them, especially that the journalists working at these stations presumably have diverse ideological backgrounds due to the different political and media systems they live in. For example, Al-Alam TV channel is run by a government that is characterized by its totalitarian rule which has a tight control over the media (Semati, 2007: 144); hence, Al-Alam channel is used as a state instrument to influence the opinions of Arab masses. Similarly,

RT is regarded as a propaganda tool in the hands of Putin's government to serve foreign policy interests (Ioffe, 2010). On the other hand, the BBC and DW, which are both regarded as public broadcasting services, are more independent from their respective governments and both originate from well-established Western democracies.

In order to have a better understanding of the news selection practices followed by these four TV channels, it is important to provide some background information on each of these media outlets. First, Al-Alam (The World) TV is a 24-hour Arabic channel that is financed and run by the Republic of Iran Broadcasting. The channel airs 36 extended and brief newscasts that are compiled by 50 correspondents stationed in 40 countries. It has four main bureaus in Tehran, Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus, and the channel started broadcasting in February 2003 with the onset of the US-led invasion of Iraq (Al-Alam, 2012). The timing of this launch seems to denote Iran's need to influence the public opinion in the Arab world and to communicate the Iranian official outlook toward the events happening in the region. Al-Alam's website is in two languages: Persian and Arabic, and it allows readers to post comments on the website. The channel admits that it gives special attention to some important issues in the Islamic world especially Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Lebanon, and African states (Al-Alam, 2012). According to the goals, which are published on its website, the channel aims at airing 'fast, credible, and precise' news, and it further claims to address 'solutions to the problems that the Islamic and Arab world is suffering from after investigating their deep roots' (Al-Alam, 2012). From the beginning, Iranian authorities installed TV transmitters near the Iraqi border to guarantee that Al-Alam's airwaves reach a large segment of the Iraqi public (Usher, 2006). During the US-led invasion of Iraq, the channel played an important role in emphasizing the number of Iraqi civilian casualties as it called the conflict a "war of domination" and routinely referred to coalition forces as "occupiers" (BBC Monitoring, 2003). Finally, Al-Alam's Facebook page has over 673k likes and 354k people talking about it (facebook.com/alalamarabic) as of 27 March 2014.

Second, BBC Arabic television started broadcasting in March 2008, though there was an earlier broadcasting in cooperation with Orbit Network in 1994 which lasted about 2 years. BBC Arabic TV is part of the BBC public broadcaster organization in the United Kingdom, but it is not as old as the BBC Arabic radio service which began transmission in 1938. On the website of BBC Arabic (bbcarabic.com), online readers cannot post any comments on news reports; instead, there is only the option of 'share your opinion' in a special section on the website. Hence, the news organization seems to freely allow online readers to post their views on Facebook because it apparently takes no time and efforts from the staff to moderate the comments on this platform, as will be explained below. According to the BBC Arabic website, the news organization is regarded as the 'most credible and objective outlets in the Arab world' (BBC Arabic, 2014). Also, over 21 million people visit its website including about 1.5 unique visitors. As for its Facebook page, it has over 2.3 million likes and 107k people talking about it (facebook.com/bbcarabic).

Third, RT Arabic (arabic.rt.com/) or Rusiya Al-Yaum started broadcasting on 4 May 2007. The name of the channel has officially changed into RT, and it is run by TV-Novosti which is affiliated with the Russian government. On its website, the channel claims to be 'non-commercial and independent', and about 350 million people can view the channel in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe (RT Arabic, 2014). Unlike BBC Arabic, RT

Arabic allows online readers to post comments on its website. Its Facebook page has over 2.5 million likes and 242k people talking about it (facebook.com/rtarabic.ru).

Finally, DW Arabic (dw.de/اقتصادسياسي/s-9106) is part of Germany's public international broadcaster. DW Arabic was established in 2002 and aired programs for 2 hours only which were later extended to 6 hours in 2011 (DW, 2011). The TV channel is not as old as its Arabic radio station that began transmission in 1959. Comments posted on DW Arabic are moderated and controlled. For example, online readers have to fill in and submit a special form in order to be able to make a comment. After 2011, airtime hours were extended. Currently, DW Arabic airs 10 hours of Arabic programs followed by 14 hours in English that reach viewers in the Middle East and North Africa. According to the DW website, two programs are very popular in the Arab world, Shabab talk (Youth talk) and The New Arab Debates because they involve young Arabs debating politics and social issues (DW, 2014). Its Facebook page has over 601k likes and 31k people talking about it as of 27 March 2014 (facebook.com/dw.arabic).

In most cases, the Facebook page administrator posts the news headline, a hyperlink that leads to the online article that is available on the news organization's website, and a lead containing a brief description of the whole article. In some cases, a video link or photo accompanies the news article. Based on a cross-examination of a random sample of over 160 news stories posted on the four Facebook pages, it appears that all the headlines and leads are typical to what is found in the websites themselves since the Facebook page administrators copy and paste the same original materials without altering them. If any online reader feels interested in a news report, (s)he can click the hyperlink leading to the complete version posted on the website. For the purpose of this study, all the news articles posted on Facebook from mid-December 2013 until mid-February 2014 were investigated in this study in order to examine the news posted in the same time frame. The news stories that are studied include 822 by DW, 1040 by BBC, 5741 by RT, and 7986 by Al-Alam, and the total number of news stories investigated in this study is 15,589 stories which are all in Arabic. Al-Hurra TV was initially chosen, but its Facebook page contained mostly questions for its online audience, so it was excluded from the study.

The collected posts were analyzed using QDA Miner 4 – Wordstat program. This study content analyzes the text corpus by identifying the most recurrent words used in the posts (Al-Rawi, 2014, 2015). Stephen (2000) studies concept analysis by 'identifying key concepts and clusters of concepts' in which he examines 'the analysis of the distribution and interconnection of pivotal ideas appearing in a textual database' (p. 197). In some of his framing studies, Entman (2010) uses QDA Miner and mentions that it was useful due to its 'improved efficiency in carrying out more complex content analyses' (p. 334). This quantitative method is useful to identify the most dominant words used by posters which 'minimizes problems of research judgment' (Miller, 1997: 376).

In this study, two main news selections are made. First, the most recurrent words based on the repetition of three times and above are examined, so all references to countries, their capitals, and any derivation of the countries' name like their different adjectives are counted. This is part of the news values study in order to investigate which countries are more prominent in the news reports in the sense that they are repeatedly mentioned. The names of countries' capitals are incorporated because in some cases the

reference to the country's capital is used as a metonym, standing for the government or state as a whole. In the end, the top 10 most referenced countries are identified as can be seen in Table 1. Second, the number of references to politicians or political actors is examined. As there are far too many politicians mentioned, the selection is limited to those who have a total of over a 100 references (see Table 2 and Figure 2). All prepositions and articles are also removed in order to focus on proper nouns.

Results and discussion

As indicated above, this study examines the Arabic language Facebook posts of four TV channels. The results of the study show that there are stark variations in the kind of attention and emphasis given to countries and political actors, but it is important to note here that some of these differences are due to the vast variations in the news volume or number of news reports posted on Facebook, as indicated above. For example, in the time frame investigated in this study, Al-Alam posted 7986 stories, whereas DW Arabic had only 822. Hence, there was a need to examine the percentage of coverage in relation to countries and political actors. The figures cited in the two tables are taken from raw data, while the percentages are calculated based on the total number of references to countries and political figures made by each news organization.

In relation to the countries cited in the headlines and leads, Table 1 shows the frequency of attention and average percentage by the four channels.

By examining the raw data of all the TV channels, we find that the top five countries cited are (1) Syria ($n=3608$), (2) Iran ($n=1772$), (3) Iraq ($n=1470$), (4) Egypt ($n=1359$), and (5) Russia ($n=1143$). Due to the disparity in the number of news stories posted on the four Facebook pages, it is also important to examine the average percentage of each country mentioned along the four Facebook pages which are as follows: (1) Syria 19.1 percent, (2) Egypt 12.3 percent, (3) Iraq 8.6 percent, (4) Russia 6.2 percent, and (5) Iran 5.9 percent (for a more complete overview of the countries frequencies, see Figure 1).

As for the references and average percentage of political actors by the four channels, Table 2 illustrates the results.

The raw data taken from all four TV channels in relation to references to political figures reveal that the top five actors are (1) Sergey Lavrov ($n=288$), (2) John Kerry ($n=244$), (3) Bashar Assad ($n=194$), (4) Vladimir Putin ($n=184$), and (5) Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ($n=164$) (see Figure 2 for another overview of the political actors highlighted by the four channels). Using the same procedure followed above with references to countries, we find that the average percentages of each political actor mentioned along the four Facebook pages are as follows: (1) Abdel Fattah el-Sisi 19.7 percent, (2) Mohammed Morsi 18.4 percent, (3) John Kerry 16.6 percent, (4) Bashar Assad 9.7 percent, and (5) Nouri Maliki 8 percent.

As explained above, news production is affected by different factors such as the ideological values of the journalists and their news organizations as well as media ownership. Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) refer to social significance as one of the important elements of newsworthiness which is related to the news 'relevance for the social system' along four dimensions: political, economic, cultural, and public (pp. 7, 15). Furthermore, Adams (1986) and Cohen et al. (1990) emphasize the importance of psychological proximity in

Table I. Frequency references and average percentage to countries by the four TV channels on their Facebook pages.

Country	DW		BBC		Al-Alam		RT		Total	
	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
1. Syria	13.4	129	13.9	142	23.9	2231	25.2	1106	3608	
2. Iran	1.5	15	1.2	13	16.3	1528	4.9	216	1772	
3. Iraq	12.5	121	5.9	60	11.7	1098	4.3	191	1470	
4. Egypt	16.5	159	18.3	186	7.5	703	7	311	1359	
5. Russia	—	0	1.1	12	1.6	151	22.3	980	1143	
6. Switzerland	5.6	54	2.8	29	6.4	600	7.7	340	1023	
7. Saudi Arabia	3.5	34	2.4	25	8.4	785	1.3	60	904	
8. Bahrain	—	0	1.7	0	9.1	854	0.4	18	872	
9. United States	4.3	42	3.7	38	2	188	7.5	333	601	
10. Lebanon	1.9	19	2	21	4.6	431	2.2	99	570	
11. United Kingdom	—	0	23.8	242	0.5	49	1.5	67	358	
12. Germany	29.6	285	—	0	—	0	0.5	24	309	

DW: Deutsche Welle; RT: Russia Today.

Table 2. Frequency references and average percentage to political actors by the four TV channels on their Facebook pages.

Topic	DW		BBC		Al-Alam		RT		Total	
	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
1. Sergey Lavrov	–	0	–	0	11.5	109	21.9	179	288	
2. John Kerry	17.2	14	22.4	13	12.2	115	14.9	102	244	
3. Bashar Assad	18.5	15	–	0	14.4	136	6.2	43	194	
4. Vladimir Putin	–	0	–	0	3.6	34	21.9	150	184	
5. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi	29.6	24	34.4	20	6.9	65	8	55	164	
6. Nouri Maliki	16	13	–	0	12	113	4	28	154	
7. Walid Muallem	–	0	–	0	10.4	98	7.7	53	151	
8. Mohammed Morsi	18.5	15	43.1	25	5.9	56	6.4	44	140	
9. Hassan Rouhani	–	0	–	0	14.7	139	–	0	139	
10. Ban Ki-Moon	–	0	–	0	8	76	8.6	59	135	

DW: Deutsche Welle; RT: Russia Today.

Figure 1. Frequency of references to countries by the four channels on their Facebook pages. The numbers above the columns represent the unique channels' numbers on the right side of this figure.

the news as another indicator of newsworthiness. In general, a news organization gives more prominence to an issue if more coverage is devoted to it (Hofstetter, 1976; Siune et al., 1984) which is evident either by the volume of coverage or by the ongoing report on the issue.

To answer the first research question on the dominance of news stories in relation to references to countries, there seems to be great variations in the number of news stories and their focus among the four channels, but it is important to note first that most of the TV channels have special sections for language teaching (Farsi, German, Russian, and English) and general information about the countries that run or host the news organization. This clearly indicates that the news organizations such as RT Arabic and Al-Alam, which are managed by their respective governments, can function as public diplomacy tools, though other purposes might be involved like promoting tourism. For RT Arabic, Syria is the country that attracted most of the attention 25.2percent ($n=1106$) which is clearly due to the ongoing conflict there. References to Russia came second 22.3percent ($n=980$) which is also understandable because of the need to add relevance and proximity

Figure 2. Frequency of references to political actors by the four channels on their Facebook pages.
The numbers above the columns represent the unique political figures' numbers on the right side of this figure.

to the news. Switzerland came third 7.7percent ($n=340$) mostly in relation to the UN-organized Geneva meeting in which officials from the Syrian government met with opposition groups and parties. The United States came fourth 7.5 percent ($n=333$) followed by Egypt 7 percent ($n=311$).

In relation to Al-Alam TV, we find the same editorial tendency followed by RT Arabic since there is a clear emphasis on highlighting Iran and its role in the region. There is also the sectarian proximity or social significance – cultural relevance that plays a role here; for example, Al-Alam made 50 references to the Houthis, the Shiite opposition group in Yemen though no other channel referred to them. Syria comes first again because of the conflict with 2231 references (23.9%) followed by Iran 16.3 percent ($n=1528$), Iraq 11.7 percent ($n=1098$), and Bahrain 9.1 percent ($n=854$). Again, religious proximity seems to play a role here as Bahrain is not regarded as a newsworthy topic by the other news organizations, but Al-Alam emphasizes the Shiite protests against the Sunni monarchy in its news reports. In fact, the channel devotes a special section for Bahraini news in order to thoroughly cover the events taking place there. Also noteworthy is the fact

that Al-Alam showed a great deal of emphasis in airing the Shiite protests in Saudi Arabia as well as the fighting between the Shiite Hawththis and government troops in Yemen. At the same time, the channel downplayed the events taking place in Syria and Iraq between Sunni rebels and Shiite government forces. As Sebastian Usher (2006) claims, Iran uses Al-Alam channel in order to 'influence and stir up opinion in the Arab world and beyond – just as it tries to control the information available to its own people within the country'. As a result, Al-Alam news coverage created anger and distrust among policy makers in the Arab world which led to jamming its signals (Press TV, 2011) and to the decision to stop its transmission on Nilesat and Arabsat on 3 November 2010. Arabsat did allow the channel to resume broadcasting, yet it stopped its transmission another time within a period of 2 months (Al-Alam, 2010). It is assumed that due to the difficulty of watching the channel in the Arab world via the two popular Arab satellites, Al-Alam enhanced its social media activity especially on Facebook to maintain and possibly increase its audience engagements. This partly explains the high number of stories posted on its Facebook page in comparison with the other channels examined in this study. According to Socialbakers (2014), Al-Alam's Facebook page fan distribution is as follows: 21.6 percent Iraq, 17.5 percent Syria, 9.5 percent Egypt, 4.8 percent Yemen, 4.7 percent Russia, 4.7 percent Saudi Arabia, 3.3 percent Lebanon, and 2.7 percent Bahrain. There seems to be some level of correlation between Al-Alam's Facebook fans and the demographic specificities of some of the above countries.

As for BBC Arabic, the United Kingdom is mentioned more than the other countries 23.8 percent ($n=242$), followed by Egypt 18.3 percent ($n=186$), Syria 13.9 percent ($n=142$), and Iraq 5.9 percent ($n=60$). Again, there is emphasis on the country of origin which runs or sponsors the news organization. Finally and as expected, DW highlighted Germany more than other countries with 285 references (29.6%) followed by Egypt ($n=159$), Syria ($n=129$), and Iraq ($n=121$). The above results show that the BBC and DW are the only channels that highlighted the events and political changes in Egypt more than the conflict in Syria. This can be explained based on the political dimension of social significance as well as the social change deviance in news values that focuses on 'threats to the status quo' in connection to covering 'civil demonstrations that bring about a new presidential election' (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006: 49).

Yet by examining all the four TV channels' average percentages, we find that Syria comes first with 19.1 percent followed by Egypt 12.3 percent, Iraq 8.6 percent, Russia 6.2 percent, and Iran 5.9 percent. The magnitude of events taking place in Syria, the follow-up factor, and the fact that it deals with bad news all explain why this country ranks first as these are all basic elements of news values (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). Based on the number of references to countries, it becomes clear that Al-Alam TV pays great attention to Bahrain and the Shiite protests in the Gulf region though the news significance cannot be compared to other important events taking place in the Arab region. Aside from the ideological influence stated above, other elements like social significance and proximity are involved in explaining the prominence given to certain countries like Russia on RT Arabic, Germany on DW Arabic, and the United Kingdom on BBC Arabic.

To answer the second research question on the dominance of news stories in relation to references to political actors, we find that RT Arabic focused on Russian politicians

much more than other actors; in this regard, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, came first with 150 references (21.9%) followed by the Russian President, Vladimir Putin 21.9 percent ($n=150$), John Kerry 14.9 percent ($n=102$), and Ban Ki-moon 8.6 percent ($n=59$). The latter was mostly mentioned in connection to the Geneva meeting cited above. As for the attention given to political actors by Al-Alam TV, the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, was the most referenced 14.7 percent ($n=139$), followed by Bashar Assad 14.4 percent ($n=136$), John Kerry 12.2 percent ($n=115$), and Nouri Maliki 12 percent ($n=113$). Ideological affinity and psychological proximity seem to play a role here as Assad, an Alawite whose government is closely backed by the Iranian regime, is highlighted in Al-Alam's TV news reports far more than the other channels. Also, Al-Alam and RT Arabic are the only two channels that highlighted the activities of Walid Mualllem Al-Mu'lam, the Syrian Foreign Minister. Similar to Iran, Russia is a staunch ally of Assad's regime for various reasons including some shared interests as well as Putin's alleged fear that the popular sentiments of overthrowing totalitarian regimes in the Middle East might spread to Russia (Allison, 2013: 815–818). According to a qualitative study examining the Russian media coverage of the Syrian conflict, more blame for the prevailing violence is directed at Islamist radicals rather than Assad's regime which includes accusing the Syrian opposition to be behind the chemical attack in the outskirts of Damascus (Brown, 2014: 57). This kind of coverage is understandable if we take into account that the media in Russia is largely polarized especially in relation to 'nationally distributed TV channels', and RT is certainly included because it is state-funded; these channels are 'increasingly used by the state as tools to support the vertical power system ...' (Vartanova, 2012: 134).

As for the main political actors mentioned by BBC Arabic, we only find Mohammed Morsi 43.1 percent ($n=25$), the former Egyptian president, coming first followed by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi 34.4 percent ($n=20$) and John Kerry 22.4 percent ($n=13$). As for references to political actors by DW, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi 29.6 percent ($n=24$) is the most cited actor followed by Mohammed Morsi 18.5 percent ($n=15$), Bashar Assad 18.5 percent ($n=15$), and John Kerry 17.2 percent ($n=14$) (see Table 2 and Figure 2). As mentioned above, the more attention given to a country or political actor, the more importance is shown. In other words, each news organization paid special emphasis to their respective countries and national politicians except for the BBC and DW, though the latter made 21 references to Angela Merkel. One of the main possible reasons for such a difference in coverage is that the Iranian and Russian channels are directly supported and influenced by their respective governments as stated above which ultimately affect the news values' choices. On the other hand, the BBC and DW showed different emphases because they are more independent from their governments, especially in terms of funding due to their mandate as public broadcasting services.

Conclusion

Since SNS use has become an integral part of the news consumption experience in today's world, it has become important to thoroughly study news organizations' social media use. Indeed, SNSs offer new opportunities for news organizations to reach more audiences in what Hermida (2010) called 'ambient journalism' or a non-moderated

platform for online readers. These platforms have become magnets for interested readers to consume, share, like, and disseminate news as well as interact with others on a variety of issues and in a very timely, thorough, and engaging manner.

This study examined the news posted on the Facebook pages of four Arabic language TV stations: The Iranian Al-Alam TV, the RT, the German DW, and the BBC. From the total 15,589 news stories analyzed, the study finds that social significance and proximity as well as the news organizations' ideological agenda are among the principal elements that explain the news selection process. The results of this study correspond with Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Harcup and O'Neill's (2001) theories on the taxonomy of news particularly in relation to social significance and proximity as well as the news organizations' ideological agenda (Thompson, 1990).

For future research, other news organizations can be selected in order to find differences and similarities in the news stories posted on SNSs. Also, other social media platforms can be chosen like Twitter, Google+, and YouTube to find whether differences exist in the quantity and type of news stories posted by news organizations. Finally, semi-structured interviews with journalists and news organizations staff responsible for managing the various SNS platforms of news organizations can shed light into important aspects that have not been covered in this study.

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