

The Depiction of the 1991 Kurdish Uprising in Selected English Internet Articles: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The 1991 Kurdish Uprising is considered by many as some of the greatest events in the modern history of the Kurdish people. While the historic event still resonates in the collective psyche of the Kurdish people, it remains much less known about to the wider world. Websites are believed to be one of the fastest and easiest among other types of media channels in today's globalized world to retrieve and disseminate desired information. Yet, like any other media channels they are hardly, if ever, independent and impartial. This area is not sufficiently discoursed by linguists and media scholars in Kurdistan.

This paper attempts to show how selected English websites picture the 1991 Kurdish uprising for the minds of their audiences and tries to examine and analyze such pictures in order to disclose what is being less overtly suggested and claimed. It is expected that articles published on English websites on the uprising employ a language that leave the readers with different impressions on the event. Such impressions, as expected, are not identical with the actual event or its consequences. The paper adopts a qualitative approach. The data for the paper are generated from the internet websites which include two selected articles from different sources. The articles are then analyzed critically adopting concepts from critical discourse analysis to uncover the attitudes of their publishers towards the important milestone in the history of Kurdistan. The study concludes that the picture attached to the 1991 Kurdish uprising is indistinctively mixed up with the 1991 Shiite uprisings in southern Iraq. Moreover, the articles present a more tragic illustration of the uprisings while fail to shed enough light on the glorious consequences in terms of a move towards self-rule and autonomy.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, 1991 Kurdish Uprising, Electronic Media, internet

1. Introduction

The Kurdish 1991 Uprising was a turning point in the history of Kurdistan (Salih, 2014). It was the catalyst for a great geopolitical change that shaped the lives of the Kurdish people thereafter. After quarter a century since the event, Kurdish people still celebrate the uprising's anniversary. It is regarded as the beginning of liberation and self-rule for the nation in Kurdistan (Ibid.).

However, the outer world is not as much informed about the event. Media in general, and the internet specifically play an important role in circulating knowledge. Accordingly, some internet websites have published articles about the uprisings. However, the presentation and illustration of the event and its consequences found on such websites does not seem to be similar to what an insider have in mind about it. This can be a result of the ideologies in action by such publishing websites. This paper will try to critically analyze two selected articles among others and examine how they picture the event.

1.1. The 1991 Kurdish Uprising

On March 5, 1991, soon after the defeat of Iraqi army in the Gulf War, Kurdish people from Raniya city rebelled against Saddam Hussein's regime. The event happened two days after the beginning of the uprisings in Basra province in southern Iraq. Consequently, Raniya city witnessed the onset of the uprisings in the Kurdish region. Following that, the uprisings spread so fast and strongly that in a matter of less than three weeks all Kurdish territories were swept off the Iraqi authority (Hiltermann, 1994, p. 1).

Looking back, the event was very significant for the Kurds because despite the brutal revenge and takeover of the lost territories by the cruel Baathist regime which resulted in a horrific flight of the Kurdish people to borders with Iran, Turkey and beyond, it led to establishing a 'safe haven' by allies in war with Iraq, particularly, The United States, France, and the Great Britain. The 'safe haven' embraced majority of the Kurdish areas, excluding Kerkuk province and was protected from the Iraqi army. The Iraqi regime later unilaterally withdrew from the area, leading to a de facto autonomy. Later, following a parliamentary election in 1992, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was established. (Hiltermann, 1994, p. 1 ; Bal, 2004, pp. 364-5)

Now that 25 years have passed since that time, the Kurdish people still celebrate its anniversary as a symbol and reminder for glory, independence, and liberation. As former prime minister of KRG, Barham Salih in a tweet on the occasion of celebrating the day in 2014 stated: "Today marks anniversary of Kurdish uprising in 1991. Turning point in history of region, launch of Kurdistan self government." The historical account of the Kurdish 1991 uprising can be found in many history books and archives (Katzman, 2010; University of Minnesota, 2008; Hiltermann, 1994; Entessar, 2010; Bal, 2004). Yet, recent studies indicate that electronic media enjoys a growing readership and audience. That growing in readership and audience is can be partially explained in terms of factors of cost, accessibility, time, and convenience. "Internet is the fastest growing medium of information and

communication in history” as claimed by some scholars (ITU 1997; Clemente, 1998) cited in (Janelle & Hodge, 2013).

Among other types of electronic media, many websites (bbc.co.uk, pbs.org, disinformation.com) have published articles related to the uprising. Thus, regardless of limitations of time and space, an individual can access such articles anytime and anywhere.

1.2. The Internet Medium and Discourse:

We live in a world that becomes more and more connected each day. Via accessing the internet, the limit of space diminishes. Regardless of location, we can all turn into world citizens when we are on the internet. Or, in other words, we can become ‘*netizens*’, a word used by Crystal (2006) to mean citizens of the internet (p.3).

Probably, what is interesting about the internet is that it is the product of convergence. As it is defined by Pavlik (1996, p.132) as cited in Medoff & Kaye (2011, p.7) as the “coming together of all forms of mediated communication in an electronic, digital form, driven by the computers.” One of the many opportunities the internet can provide is publishing and receiving information. Accordingly, so much different content is published on the websites, including articles. However, the internet articles are published by websites and can reflect their ideologies and priorities.

Internet is a medium with special features and opportunities. As Crystal (2006:26) states “the internet is an electronic, global and interactive medium.” The possibilities that the internet has provided are numerous, including providing new ways to relate to others and offering another technological medium through which individuals and societies can express themselves and their priorities. However, another distinct use of the internet is to seek information (Green, 2010, p. 1).

Moreover, one of the interesting facts about the internet medium compared to other analogous mediums is the vast accessibility. As Green (2010: 2) points out, almost everybody can access the internet. Although she doesn’t hide the fact that the rate of accessibility is not consistent universally as in some parts of the world internet access is more restricted to the richer and the more educated. However, in most parts of the world it is highly accessible. As in many western countries it is so pervasive that almost anyone can access it.

Nevertheless, internet media, similar to other forms of media, is not neutral and free from ideologies and bias in its content. They can be designed to express ideologies, but they can also be read to discover the circumstances that led them being composed as they have been (Richard:2004:129)

Moreover, similar to any other types of media channels, websites are also run by individuals, organizations, and social groups with a particular interest. Consequently, their bias can reflect in their produced work (van Dijk, 2008).

Bias and partiality can be either overtly expressed or covertly implied. Actually, as Fairclough (2013, p.7) puts it “ideologies are most effective when its workings are least effective.” Among other means for uncovering covert implications and intentions

analyzing discourse is some of the most effective. Another focus of the analysis will be determining the attitudes of the publishing websites towards the 1991 Kurdish uprising.

This paper tries to see how selected internet articles depict the 1991 Kurdish uprising. It tries to understand what impression an outsider and less-informed will be given while surfing the net and comes across such articles. The paper analyzes two articles published by different websites.

2. Method

The study adopts critical discourse analysis (CDA) for its theoretical framework. More specifically, it relies on Teun van Dijk's concept of control and domination. Control, according to him, is traditionally defined as control over the actions of others. Control over the discourse of others is one of the most obvious ways power and discourse are related. However, Control does not only apply to discourse as a social practice, but also to the minds of those who are being controlled, that is, their knowledge, opinions, ideologies, as well as other personal and social representation. (van Dijk, 2008, p. 9)

Mind control, generally, is indirect, an intended but only possible and probable consequence of discourse. Those who control discourse may control the people's minds, and since people are controlled by their minds (knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms, and values), mind control means indirect action control (Ibid.).

Therefore, the concept of control and domination as illustrated by van Dijk can be applied for the study and bear significant implication. The reason for this is the fact that internet is just another medium in which control and domination are probably more pervasive and easily carried out than other communication media. As he believes that despite the fact that the new 'mass' media and especially the internet has provided many opportunities for the readers, it remains to be seen through more critical analysis if such new opportunities have also made readers more critical and independent to resist the sophisticated manipulation expressed through messages that seemingly addresses them more personally, but in fact might implement dominant ideologies that are not changed much (van Dijk, 2008, p. 11).

As many other research done in CDA, the analysis is done on both the micro and macro levels. On the micro level, specific linguistic and discursive choices and instances are examined and scrutinized closely. On the macro level however, the connection of such choices and instances to the wider non-linguistic and non-discursive context is established. Accordingly, the results are drawn from both levels of analysis.

3. Analysis

This paper is limited to analyzing two internet articles from different websites as the source of its data. Besides being written in English, a decisive element for their selection was their direct relevance to the subject matter, i.e. the uprising and its illustration. These articles are the following:

3.1. Flashback: The 1991 Iraqi Revolt

This is the headline of an article published on BBC website in 2007. In a brief and concise account, the 1991 uprising is illustrated. However, as it is clear from the very headline of the article, it points to the 1991 uprisings in Iraq generally not the Kurdish uprising in particular. Moreover, the historical event is described as a 'revolt' which ended up disastrously.

Summarizing the presentation of the article, one can say the following lines:

On March 3, 1991, the Shiites in the south and the Kurds in the north of Iraq took advantage of the situation of demoralized Iraqi army after the defeat in Gulf war. They were urged by former American President George Bush with a false promise when he said: "that is for the Iraqi military and Iraqi people to take matter into their own hands, to force Saddam Hussein the dictator to step aside." However, the US betrayed the Iraqi people by not fulfilling the indirect promise when the uprisings spread so vastly as to exclude 14 out of the 18 provinces of Iraq from the Saddam's authority.

Consequently, Saddam responded brutally and cracked down the uprisings fiercely which led to a disaster to Iraqi people. The scale of the atrocities was so vast that still 'mass graves continue to be uncovered'

Critically reading the article, it can be noticed that the picture drawn concerning the uprisings bears significant imbalance and is not enough informative. . This can be explained in the following points:

First, the uprisings in the Kurdish region (or north of Iraq as put in the article) is described and dealt with together with the Shiite uprisings in the south of Iraq. In doing so, much emphasis is put on the Shiite uprisings as much of the article is allocated to this. Moreover, the words 'Kurd' and 'Kurdish' is mentioned only twice while the word 'shia' is mentioned five times. That imbalance is equally true for the proportion of the lines as and the text predominantly deals with the Shiite uprising while there is only occasional reference to the Kurdish one.

Second, the article is not sufficiently informative in its illustration. After a brief narrative of the event, the article turns to depicting its disastrous consequences. In doing so, only the dark side of the consequences is offered. For example, 'the uncovering of mass graves today' is mentioned which resulted in the cracking down of the uprisings, while the geopolitical reality of Kurdistan region which changed since then is not.

Actually, the purely tragic depiction can be seen in the very headline of the article: "Flashback: the 1991 Iraqi revolt". According to the Oxford Dictionary one of the

meanings of the word flashback is “a disturbing sudden vivid memory of an event in the past, typically as a result of psychological trauma“.

“The massacres further scarred the country's collective memory and haunt Iraq to this day as mass graves continue to be uncovered.” This is the line by which the article come to an end of its narration.

Therefore, it can be concluded that BBC’s depiction of the uprisings is both unbalanced when it comes to dealing with the Kurdish uprisings and the Shiite uprisings in the south of Iraq, and attached a purely tragic image to the uprisings altogether.

3.2. Suppression of the 1991 uprising

This article is published on the PBS website. It is one of a series of articles under the headline: “The Crimes of Saddam Hussein” written by Johns Daves. The article recounts the uprisings from the “South”, and the “North” Separately. After that, it draws upon Saddam’s violent response and crushing the rebels. Finally, it moves to the charges and the evidence of the crimes done by the regime. It is worth noting that the PBS website is intended to provide knowledge and understanding to its audience generally, in particular the Americans. Therefore, what is published on the website is closely like what can be grasped from outer world behind a window.

The article deals, to some extent, favorably with the Kurdish uprising as it refers to the prior agreement “in a bid to autonomy” between Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, then heads of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) respectively and their ‘*Peshmerga*’ who were “*tough fighters*”. However, it also refers to the role of the “Jash” (who were local fighter recruited by Saddam) in the uprisings while fail to put any specific emphasis on the public willingness and their active participation as the major factor for the uprisings.

Although a moderate balance is given to the importance and the intensity of the uprisings by the Kurds and the Shiite and the consequences, it can be observed that more attention is allocated to the brutality of the Iraqi security forces in crushing Shiite uprising and the destruction of their holy shrines as the ultimate consequence than to the crucial change in the political reality of the Kurdish areas and the de facto autonomy gained since then. Similarly, the very headline of the article ‘*Suppression of the 1991 Uprising*’ is a reflection of this fact as it can direct the focus on the suppression and the disaster rather than any possible fortunate consequences.

In conclusion, while the article successfully draws some of the gloomy aspects of the uprisings by both the Kurds and the Shiite in southern Iraq, it doesn’t seem to counterbalance it with the glory and the development that followed the event in the Kurdish areas. Thus, the impression it may attach to the event can be judged as incomplete and uneven.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis done reveals that the representation of the 1991 Kurdish uprising in the internet articles is not quite accurate and sufficiently informative. While the analyzed articles have given remarkable attention to the tragedy of the suppression and the calamities, they failed to draw a distinction between the ultimate and long term consequences of the uprisings in the south of Iraq by the Shiites and in the Kurdish areas in the north by the Kurds.

The indistinct treatment of the Kurdish uprising from the Shiite uprisings in southern Iraq may be understood as a reminder of the fact that the Kurdish region is still being regarded as an indistinct part of Iraq. Thus, it appears that the authors behind the articles do not want to highlight the different political reality on the ground today. As it is easy to see that the Kurdish geopolitical reality has undergone a remarkable process of change and development, especially with regard to political sovereignty and international recognition.

5. Conclusions

This study tried to illustrate the picture attached to the 1991 Kurdish uprising in selected English internet articles. Based on Teun van Dijk's concepts of power, control and domination in critical discourse analysis, the paper found out that different internet articles have different representations for the historical event. Such difference was explained in the light of observations and insights in CDA. The study concludes that:

- The Kurdish 1991 uprising is indistinctly mixed up with the Shiite uprisings in the south of Iraq
- The 1991 uprisings in Iraq, including the Kurdish areas, is obviously pictured as a tragedy and a disastrous event
- There is either very little or no reference to the fortunate consequences of the uprising for the Kurdish people. In other words, the gain of autonomy and self-rule and the establishment of the parliament and the first Kurdistan Regional Government are not adequately highlighted

Therefore, the impression the articles examined give to their readers is significantly different from the local impression Kurdish people hold concerning the uprisings.

6. Suggestions for Further Study

More research can be done related to the current one; potential idea can be:

- A multimodal Analysis of the 1991 Kurdish Uprising Illustration of Internet Articles
- A comparative study of the local and the foreign internet media attitudes towards the 1991 Kurdish Uprising

7. Recommendations

This paper recommends that local media in Kurdistan region and relevant parties publish more content on the 1991 Kurdish uprising in English language on the internet. This will allow the outsider netizens to grasp a more positive and accurate understanding of the history of our people. This need is even more strongly felt as even the official website of KRG has put only a few lines about the uprisings in its history section.

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ویناکردنی راپهرینی ۱۹۹۱ ی کورد له وتاری ههلبژێردراوی ئینگلیزی ئینتەرنێت

گوتارشیکاری رهخنه‌گرانه

پوخته

زۆرکەس راپهرینی سالی ۱۹۹۱ ی کوردان به رووداویکی هه‌ره‌گرنگ داده‌نین له‌مێژووی هاوچه‌رخي گه‌لی کورد. له‌کاتی‌کدا ئه‌و رووداوه‌ مێژوویه‌ هه‌شتا له‌ یاده‌وه‌ری گه‌لی کورد ده‌زنگه‌یه‌وه‌، هه‌شتا جیهانی ده‌روه‌ه‌ زۆر که‌متر پێی زانیوه‌وه‌. له‌ دونه‌ی به‌جیهانیبوونی ئه‌مرۆ، باوه‌ر وایه‌ وێب‌سایته‌کان یه‌کی‌کن له‌ خه‌راترین و ئاسانه‌ترین که‌ناڵه‌کانی میدیا بۆ وه‌رگرتن و بلا‌وکردنه‌وه‌ی زانیاری خوازاو. له‌گه‌ڵ ئه‌وه‌شدا، هاوشیوه‌ی که‌ناڵه‌کانی دیکه‌ی میدیا، به‌ده‌گمه‌ن، یا هه‌رگیز، سه‌ربه‌خۆ و بێ‌لایه‌ن نین. زمانه‌وان و توێژه‌رانی میدیا ئه‌و بواره‌یان به‌پێی پێویست تاوتوێ نه‌کردوه‌وه‌ له‌ کوردستان.

ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ هه‌ول ده‌دات نیشانی بدات چه‌ند وێب‌سایته‌کی هه‌لبژێردراو به‌لام جیاواز چۆن وێنه‌ی راپهرینی سالی ۱۹۹۱ ی کورد ده‌که‌ن له‌ هه‌زی خوێنه‌رانیه‌ن و هه‌ول ده‌دات ئه‌و وێنه‌ به‌شکێت و شیان‌بکاته‌وه‌ بۆ ده‌رخستنی ئه‌وه‌ی که‌متر به‌ ئاشکرای ده‌گه‌رنه‌یت و بانگه‌شه‌ی بۆ ده‌کریت. وا پێشبینی ده‌کریت ئه‌و وتارانه‌ی له‌ وێب‌سایته‌ ئینگلیزه‌کان له‌سه‌ر راپه‌رین بلا‌ویان کردوونه‌ته‌وه‌ زمانیک به‌کارده‌ین که‌ به‌شیوه‌ی جیاواز خوێنه‌رانیه‌ن تێده‌گه‌یه‌ن. وه‌ک پێشبینی ده‌کریت، ئه‌و تێگه‌یشتنه‌ هه‌وا نین له‌گه‌ڵ راستی رووداوه‌که‌ یان ده‌ره‌نجامه‌کانی.

توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ رێبازی لیکۆلینه‌وه‌ی جۆری به‌کارده‌ین. سه‌رچاوه‌ی داتای توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ چه‌ند وێب‌سایته‌کی ئینگلیزیه‌ که‌ بریتیه‌ له‌ دوو وتاری هه‌لبژێردراو له‌ سه‌رچاوه‌ی جیاواز. دواتر، وتاره‌کان به‌ شیوازیکی ره‌خنه‌گرانه‌ شیکراونه‌ته‌وه‌ بۆ ده‌رخستنی هه‌لوێستی خاوه‌نه‌کانیه‌ن به‌رامبه‌ر ئه‌و خاله‌ گرنگه‌ی مێژووی کوردستان. ده‌ره‌نجامه‌کانی توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ ده‌ریده‌خه‌ن که‌ ویناکردنی راپهرینی ۱۹۹۱ ی کورد تێه‌له‌کشی راپهرینی شیعیه‌کانی خوارووی عێراق کراوه‌ بۆ ئه‌وه‌ی ره‌چاوی تابه‌تمه‌ندییه‌کانی بکریت. هه‌روه‌ها، ئه‌و وتارانه‌ به‌شیوه‌یه‌کی زیاتر تراژیدی وینای راپه‌رینه‌که‌ ده‌که‌ن بۆ ئه‌وه‌ی به‌پێی پێویست تیشک به‌خه‌نه‌ سه‌ر ده‌رنجامی پر له‌ شکۆمندی له‌ لایه‌نی نزیکه‌بوونه‌وه‌ له‌ ئۆتۆنۆمی و خۆبه‌ریوه‌بردن.

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