SOUWARNA ~ The Citizen Journalism Website for university students in Baghdad

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Our project aims to empower youths by providing them with a web platform to upload and accurately caption their photographs of the events, people and places that matter to them — photos that can then be used by others to tell good news stories about Iraq.

(http://souwarna.wordpress.com/)
Image from: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/info/30315/middle_east/315/iraq

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INTRODUCTION
The human rights and empowerment group at the Salzburg Academy on Media and Change worked for three weeks to create projects that supported the rights of disenfranchised groups in nations the UNDP typically targets. The group zeroed in on the critical importance of supporting women and youth in developing nations and created projects to solve major problems they identified after research. After much research, the group opted to align itself with one of the UNDP’s major goals for empowerment — education for human rights — because education can push long-term change. This group is recommending three projects, in Afghanistan, Argentina and Iraq.

- The project recommended for Afghanistan seeks to empower mothers and children through learn-and-play cards — cards that provide critical information about first aid and basic hygiene on their fronts, and a fun zoo puzzle on their backs.
- The project recommended for Argentina seeks to empower young girls through a card guessing game that teaches them about career possibilities — a game that helps girls recognize that they have the skills to reach their dreams.
- The project recommended for Iraq aims to empower youths by providing them with a web platform to upload and accurately caption their photographs of the events, people and places that matter to them — photos that can then be used by others to tell good news stories about Iraq.
PART I - FRAMING THE PROBLEM

Country: Iraq

Issue: Empowering underrepresented Iraqi students through citizen journalism

Rationale:
We are aiming to promote a culture of accurate, responsible citizen journalism among the youth of Iraq. Over half of the Iraqi population is less than 24 years of age (56.3%), making it one of the most youthful nations in the world (United Nations Country Team Iraq, 2014; CIA World Factbook, 2014). Even so, media coverage of the youth is lacking, meaning that a vast majority of voices are unheard. A simple Internet search on Iraq yields an overwhelming amount of coverage on conflict and tragedy, but what we don’t see is the positive side of living as a young Iraqi citizen. In order to alleviate some of this negative attention, we will provide the Iraqi youth with the tools to become more responsible, informed citizen journalists, as well as promote positive aspects of living in Iraq. The major objective of this program is to counter traditional aspects of conflict journalism with positive cultural stories of Iraqi youth, building citizen involvement to empower and refocus attention of the communities in Iraq. Positive engagement of the youth may build common ground for the citizens and communities to overcome sectarian issues threatening the lives of the Iraqi people and worldwide community.

Challenge and Audience
Iraqi citizens are faced with conflicting reports and photographs through social media outlets and even traditional media. These usually negative stories reinforce Iraq’s deep-rooted sectarianism. Our audience for this initiative is one of the largest demographics in Iraq—the youth. More specifically, we are targeting young activists, high school students, and college students in Baghdad. Research shows a positive correlation between education levels and use of the Internet, which is why we are targeting students and graduates—they have greater access to the Internet. There is also a lack of access to schools due to the difficulty of implementing new and external initiatives within the Iraqi educational system, making it difficult to reach a younger audience of students (Dhafer Hasan of UNDP, 2014).

Role of the Media
Although Iraq’s constitution guarantees journalists and citizens freedom of the press and the media, the reality of the situation is much more complex (Freedom House, 2013). The country is considered dangerous for journalists, especially throughout the past decade. There is political pressure on the media outlets, meaning that stories about other parties are not represented in an accurate manner, creating an issue of inaccuracy or bias in news stories (USIP, 2009). There are six main newspapers, one of which is sponsored by the state (Al-Sabah). There are also three main news agencies on the Internet, one of which is Aswat Al Iraq, or Voices of Iraq. As this initiative was launched by Reuters and the UNDP, this would be an ideal place to potentially publish the most popular photos and articles from our website (BBC, 2013).

PART II - OUR SOLUTION

Our website will establish an online local news forum where young adults can connect with their communities, learn of current events, and develop media literacy skills by sharing their stories.
News coverage will be aggregated from the posts of these users. The website, Souwarna, (Arabic for ‘our images’) allows young adults to upload an original image and a basic news story to one of our content areas. Users will then fill out a template which asks for the 5 W’s of a news story - what happened, who was involved, when it occurred, where it occurred, and why it happened. There will also be a space for users to list relevant hashtags. All posts will be added to the community news feed, giving users the opportunity to "up-vote" the best, most relevant posts and "report" any less than credible or apparently biased posts. If a post is reported more than a set number of times, it will be evaluated by a moderator or taken down from the site. This system will promote fair and unbiased reporting on posts. After every third submission by a user, a pop-up window will appear offering tips for improving one’s reporting skills.

Initially, we will focus our efforts on targeting university students in Baghdad and surrounding universities. These students have far more access to computers and the internet on a regular basis than the younger demographic. According to Dhafer Hasan, UNDP project officer in Baghdad, citizen journalism is a popular concept in this demographic.

**Implementation:**
Prior to launching the website, a beta version would run for one month. A randomly selected group of potential users would be asked to use the site and provide feedback. The site would then be adjusted based on user feedback. We will also conduct a feedback survey once the website has been running for two months. We will ask the users to provide feedback on how well the site works, usability, and any suggested improvements. If it is found that the website is successful we will decide whether it should be rolled out on a larger scale to more students in different regions.

We intend to partner with UNDP Baghdad and a group of around 7,000 youth activists on two pre-existing projects, Aswat Al Iraq and the Youth Cafe News (see appendix). We will use these forums to publish the stories which have received the most amount of stars from other users. This will give students an additional incentive to contribute to the website.

We also plan to partner with universities such as the University of Baghdad to sustain the project. We would like to work with student unions at universities in order to encourage student participation to sustain the site. To attract users and build interest we are initiating a competition (see appendix) which provides an incentive for students to contribute to the website.

Kickstarter is a potential source of funding for building the initial web platform, which allows potential donors to easily fund the project online. Indiegogo is another crowdfunding platform, which has supported a highly successful campaign in Iraq (see appendix). In order to fund the cost of maintain the website we plan to appeal to the NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCIRAQ). Additional funding will be sought through Peace Projects, a grant program launched by The Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF), which supports creative projects aimed towards conflict prevention and peace initiatives around the world (see appendix). Other organizations we plan to target are Save the Children and DRL (see appendix).

**Testing/Evaluating the success of our site**
As part of our initial design considerations we have created a questionnaire asking university students in Baghdad about their internet use and whether they would use a website like the one we have created. We will use the feedback to tailor the design to the needs and interests of our
target audience. We want to discover what will engage them to post photos while determining categories that stimulate involvement such that they will gain insight into their daily lives.

To evaluate the success of our site, we will use metrics to analyze the growth of the page, such as the number of users who are visiting on a monthly basis. We will examine how many stories are published weekly and monthly. Another important metric is to determine is the increase in the number of “likes” or up-votes on photos and stories. The more interaction with the articles, the higher the indication that the website is successfully attracting increasing numbers of users. In this way, we will measure both the amount of users who are interacting with the page, but also the nature of their interaction. An important metric to assess growth is the ratio of posts to visits. We anticipate that more visitors would be posting on a regular basis rather than simply reading other articles.
The website prompts users to upload a photo and the news elements of a story to one of four content areas. The options are: Arts & Entertainment, Campus, Community, and Sports. Users can also create a hashtag that will bring them to a page of related news. A journalism tip will pop upon every third submission of an article.
The newsfeed will feature the most popular and relevant articles and photos of the day. The more “up” votes an article gets, the more visible it will become to other visitors of the site. There will be posts in both Arabic and English.