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# "WRITING FOR THE ENEMY": KURDISH LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATION ONLINE

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# 1. Introduction

Wikis and the social web have created platforms conducive to collaboration and discourse at an unprecedented rate and level. These social tools have brought about new opportunities, affordances, demands and risks that not only challenge existing power relations (Castells, *Communication Power*), but give rise to bottom-up solutions to societal problems. Democratization of both knowledge creation and dissemination (Fuchs 255; Shirky 297)—stimulated by participatory culture—is a natural by-product of such change which enables users' to contribute regardless of their commitment or their expertise (Jenkins et al. 6). Such transformation is both facilitated by technology and helps spur technological innovation (Castells, *Rise of Network Society* 37). A change that gives birth to a radically different culture that "shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement" (Jenkins et al. 6). A culture that holds sociability and decentralized nature of Web 2.0 at its core and tapping to the wisdom of others and sharing as the means of its operation on a daily basis. Moreover, collective actions fostered by the social web, compete with, complement or challenge the already established formal institutions, not exclusively within the boundaries of the cyber world but occasionally in the physical world as well (Seib). Positions or authorities that were once considered sacred and held only by formal institutions could be undermined by preeminent "cults of amateurs" that thrive in adhocracy (Konieczny) and the world with blurred boundaries, on various fronts (Seib 2; Castells, *Rise of Network Society* xviii). Hence, identities that are under constant negotiation and construction, largely affect the structure or operation model of such communities (Castells, *Power of Identity* 9).

Wikipedia, as one of the most successful and popular encyclopedias, is a major example of communities that rely on "crowd wisdom" for knowledge production. Its decentralized nature, enables and encourages its users to be advocates of the website and helps non-expert users to be involved in knowledge creation and dissemination with the hope that "...every single person on the planet [gets] free access to the sum of all human knowledge" (Wales). Based on the "holy trinity" of Neutral Point Of View (NPOV), No original research and Verifiability principles (Reagle 12); Wikipedia is a gigantic depot of world information in slightly more than 31 million articles written in 287 languages (as of April 2014). These articles are the primary reason why the website is in operation, but it is the community that keeps it running and as thriving as it is (Wales).

The questions that arise are: How significant could such decentralized online communities be—in relation to knowledge production—in a stateless nation like Kurdistan? What role could Wikipedia play in a non-state nation with no formal, dedicated institution to promote the language integration and knowledge dissemination? In this thesis, I analyze what such roles are and what their drawbacks and advantages are in Kurdistan where language has been subject to systematic obstruction and even linguicide (Hassanpour, "Satellite footprints"). I argue that based on crowdsourcing, a robust Kurdish Wikipedia can be an epistemologically viable alternative to standardizing the language and help disseminating it. As Wikipedia provides a platform for keeping knowledge current through its vibrant communities, I will demonstrate how the platform, as a social tool, can also provide a way for keeping underprivileged languages such as Kurdish, current and thriving. In addition, I argue that a vigorous Kurdish Wikipedia can be a neutral source of knowledge dissemination in geographically and politically fragmented stateless nation such as Kurdistan, thus providing a much needed politically disinterested ground for cultural/information exchange.

This study draws from research in various academic fields on communication and media studies, Kurdish studies, linguistics and crowd and collective intelligence. For the purpose of this research, I have organized my paper into four main sections and a number of subsections. First, I will present some of the current scholarly debates related to this thesis. Following that, I will provide a brief overview of where and what Kurdistan is, thus providing the reader with a basic framework for geographical and cultural elements pertinent to the issue of standardization of the language. I will further the background information with the struggles that the Kurdish language is facing, its significance in Kurdish trans-border identity and the necessity for language unification, caused by division in Kurdistan. In the third section, I will provide a brief history of Wikipedia, as a "horizontal network of interactive communication" and knowledge dissemination. Moreover, I will be exploring some of the principals of the website, its operational model and governance. In the fourth part of this thesis, I will provide an account of the current situation of Kurdish Wikipedia in its dialects (Sorani, Zazaki and Kurmanji). Furthermore, I will argue that there is a need for a more robust Kurdish Wikipedia via demonstrating an overall comparison of Kurdish to its English and Persian sister encyclopedias. Subsequently, I will take the argument further by providing a more in-depth analysis of two case studies and their English and Persian editions. I will analyze the content of those articles based on: rigor (number of edits) and diversity (number of editors) (Bruckmank et al.), word count (Blumenstock), depth of coverage and the "Talk" section in which Wikipedians interact and discuss. Having set up the background information about the language and Kurdish Wikipedia, I will present my arguments for the use of Wikipedia as a means of unifying the Kurdish language and to help keeping it flourishing and current. I will illustrate why a robust Kurdish Wikipedia could be a viable, bottom-up alternative to stan-

dardizing the Kurdish language, and hence bridging the dichotomy in its dialects caused by different writing systems.

As a unified entity, Kurdistan is more real and present online and in the heart of the Kurds than on the world map. After the Treaty of Lausannein 1923 (McDowall; Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity*), Kurdistan was divided among four other countries and new borderlines were drawn that fragmented ethnically connected Kurds, forever. Although aligned contiguously, these four pieces of Kurdish puzzle seem to be drifting more and more apart (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity*). Over time, those geographical borders got more entrenched into the fabrics of the societies in those four parts. Consequently, a dichotomy was created that has spilled over into language, political affiliation and Kurds' collective identity to name a few. Moreover, as Castells argues, groups' collective identity is constructed according to their existing social, cultural, and historical resources and within their space/time framework (Castells, *Power of Identity* 7). Hence, the international border among those four parts widens the gap among Kurdish people living on different sides of the borderline and gives raise to different identities, and different process of identity construction (McDowall; Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity*; Hassanpour "Kurdish Experience" ). In spite of this detachment, the Kurdish language is the most prominent factor that strengthens the national identity among Kurds and distinguishes them from other dominant ethnic groups: Persian, Arab and Turks (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 160). As Fishman states: "The essence of a nationality is its spirit, its individuality, its soul. This soul is not only reflected and protected by the mother tongue, but in a sense, the mother is itself an aspect of the soul, a part of the soul, if not the soul made manifest" (Fishman, *Language and Ethnicity* 276).

Although around 30 million people speak the language (McDowall xi; Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 3), Kurdish is among the low-resourced languages (Sheykh Esmaili "Challenges") and not much has been done to make it rich and well equipped for today's information age. One of the main reasons for such underdevelopment is the systematic suppression Kurdish language has experienced from those countries that rule over Kurdistan.

Despite the fragmented nature of Kurdish language, the Internet has proven to be a fertile ground for Kurdish language and its dissemination. In an overview of the Kurdish cyber activity by Jaffer Sheyholislami, he argues: "Kurdish publishing and journalism have suffered since their inception from the lack of adequate distribution systems" (*Kurdish Identity* 142). He further states: "The Internet has enabled Kurdish writers, publishers, distributors, and readers to overcome this obstacle in important ways". The Internet has given the Kurds voice and exposure far beyond their geographical reach; an unmatched coverage that could not be imagined otherwise. The Kurdish question has benefited from such amenity to disseminate information both among Kurds and others who are interested in the Kurdish issues. The new media forms have provided advantageous platforms for production and distribution of information in Kurdish on manifold topics. Topics that range from raising awareness to strengthening national identity, from cultural dissemination to teaching the language. Sheyholislami claims that the Internet has helped with the distribution of printed material, and it has facilitated online news websites which have no print version. Moreover "[t]he Kurdish Internet is important insofar as it gives voice to those who cannot afford to broadcast…" their voice in any other media outlet (139). He further argues that the Internet helps create "… a sense of shared belonging" and provides a platform favorable"...to the construction and re-

production of a cross-border Kurdish identity, along with local and regional identities..." (174).

Along with many other features of the Internet, "…[blogging has] provided Kurds with means of writing and promoting their language" (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 151). Obviously, one of the obstacles as he indicates is: the use of two different writing systems which makes understating and exchanging text between Kurmanji and Sorani speakers rather difficult if not impossible (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 142). Kurdish language comprises many different speech varieties, which will be explored in detail later. According to Sheykh Esmaili, "…the inherent diversity of the language, standardization and segmentation issues, and the lack of language resources…" are the primary challenges toward progression of the Kurdish language ("Kurdish Text Processing").

The quality and accuracy of both groups or an individual's decision depend on many factors. Group decision-making could be even more complex as more variables such as social/peer influence and group dynamics are added into the process. Heterogeneity, as Lorenz et al. argue, is one of these elements that increases the accuracy of decision-making. In addition, Surowiecki's argument seems to verify such claim by stating that: diversity of opinion, independence, decentralization, and aggregation of the crowd are the necessary conditions for crowd wisdom (11, 21, 22). "Diversity adds perspective" (Surowiecki 29) and helps the group see a dilemma from different viewpoints and perform better at solving it (Surowiecki 30). As a group faces problems of various degrees or levels, having members with various background knowledge will help the group take more dimensions of the problems into account and have a higher chance at ultimately solving them. On the contrary, lack of diversity in a group narrows its vision and operational field.

Social influence is a factor that diminishes the diversity in the group and hence decreases group's decision-making accuracy (Muchnik). As Lorenz et al. argue, even slight social influence can affect the wisdom of the crowd and therefore not contributing to the group's error improvement. They further contend that the heterogeneity of numerous decision makers helps produce a more accurate average estimate than of a single expert decision-maker. According to diversity prediction theorem, "…the average collective error equals to average individual error minus diversity" (Lorenz et al.). Which means that, a group's average error is always less than the error of an average estimate. Average accuracy increases as the group gets more diverse.

Second element of a wise group is, independence. As Surowiecki argues: "Paradoxically, the best way for a group to be smart is for each person in it to think and act as independently as possible" (Surowiecki xx). If members of a group of people are not independent, their decision is affected by the most powerful or influential people in the group. Therefore, not everyone is able to think individually. Failure to do so, results in the thinking or decision making in the group that gravitates toward a certain pole where lies most power. "The more influence a group's members exert on each other, and the more personal contact they have with each other, the less likely it is that the group's decision will be a wise one. It is possible that we become individually smarter but collectively dumber" (Surowiecki 42). However, Lorenz et al. claim "… it is hardly feasible to receive independent opinions in society, because people are embedded in social networks and typically influence each other to a certain extent. It is remarkable how little social influence is required to produce herding behavior and negative side effects for the mechanism underlying the wisdom of crowds."

"… [H]umans have an inclination to adjust their opinions to those of others so that they gradually converge toward consensus." Based on this and providing that "some mechanism exists for turning private judgments into a collective decision" (Surowiecki 11), the collective results are more accurate than an individual's decision.

Decentralization is another earmark of crowd wisdom and according to Surowiecki, in an intelligent crowd, it is a given. "… it implies that if you set a crowd of self-interested, independent people to work in a decentralized way on the same problem, instead of trying to direct their efforts from the top down, their collective solution is likely to be better than any other solution a single individual could come up with" (Surowiecki 70). Social networks and the Internet are the most visible examples of decentralized systems (Terranova 81) "… which allow people to connect and coordinate with each other without a single person being in charge" (Surowiecki 70).

Altshuler et al. argue that the crowd most of the time makes the best choices but their choices are not always optimal. They argue that social influence is very important in decisions we make individually and in groups, especially financial decision making— as the focus of their research. "Financial decisions are supposed to be rational choices but even in such delicate situations we are influenced by our social connections" (Altshuler et al.). Our peers do influence us and decisions we make under such influences, tend not to be our best decisions. They argue that social feedback can override individual rational thinking. The crowd makes excellent but not always optimal decisions in selecting experts when they see additional choices.

Among critics of "wisdom of crowd" are, Bahrami et al. They present the opposite side of the wisdom of crowd, a less positive interpretation of this phenomenon which was

first introduced by Charles Mackay. He spoke of the madness of crowds and their follies. Likewise, in *Digital Maoism*, Jaron Lanier sets forth a rather pessimistic outlook on the crowd wisdom and argues that crowds are not necessarily always more intelligent than single individual experts. He starts his argument by saying that: "The hive mind is for the most part stupid and boring. Why pay attention to it?" (Lanier). He believes that under some certain conditions crowds can be intelligent.

According to Lanier, the "no original research" principle of Wikipedia is a problematic feature of the encyclopedia for one major reason: "most of the technical or scientific information that is in the Wikipedia was already on the Web before the Wikipedia was started". He believes putting this already available information on Wikipedia decontextualizes the data and removes the authorship and the flavor from a piece of writing by "wikifieing" it. He further argues that "[t]he best guiding principle is to always cherish individuals first" (Lanier). He states that "every authentic example of collective intelligence that I am aware of also shows how that collective was guided or inspired by well-meaning individuals". Clay Shirky disagrees with Lanier and argues that "Digital Maoism mischaracterizes [Wikipedia's] present situation in two ways": First is, in the use of a catchphrase "hive mind" used by those who do not fully understand the word and second, by "overgeneralization" of the drawbacks of collective production of intellectual work.

Coordination and management of individuals comprise a significant portion of resources in a big hierarchical organization (Shirky 30). In addition, as groups grow, keeping their structure functioning becomes even difficult. Moreover, reaching consensus is another factor that is directly affected by the growth of a group. Consequently, as groups grow in size, more time and energy is required for negotiation and reaching agreements (Shirky 27). An-

other determining factor in a functional group is communication. By the same token, as the group expands so does the possibility of miscommunication and the related efforts that needed to maintain it (Shirky 45).

Contrary to common belief, loosely affiliated groups can be more effective at accomplishing certain tasks than large formal institutions. Shirky believes that unmanaged division of labour is one of the main reasons/incentives by which Wikipedia gathers individuals who each often offers a tiny contribution. Additionally, Muchnik et al. argue millions of users edit Wikipedia articles daily, but 5% of users account for 80% of its total content. Thus, this ratio in user contribution is a reminiscent "of well-known Pareto principle of which states—pertinent to Wikipedia— that 80% of content of Wikipedia is provided by 20% of its users".

One of the reasons for user contribution and the success of Wikipedia is a common goal. As Shirky argues: "For a group to take collective action, it must have some shared vision strong enough to bind the group together, despite periodic decisions that will inevitably displease at least some members" (53). Other reasons for Wikipedia's success are openness and " the multiple motivation of its users to raise average quality". According to Shirky, an article on Wikipedia is not a product but rather a process that could go on for ever (119). Thus, Wikipedia can be updated constantly and the quality of the articles will improve overtime.

Digital ecosystems are the equivalent of biological ecosystems… "which are considered to be robust, del-organizing and scalable artituecturea that can automatically solve complex, dynamic problems" (Briscoe and Wilde). By the same token, Wikipedia's ecosystem can be quite chaotic but, this inadequacy is a reason for people to improve it. He lists: Vanity, "…a chance to exercise some usual mental capacities," and the desire to do something good

and meaningful as the reasons why people contribute to Wikipedia (Shirky 132,133). He argues that a novel technology combined with a "novel social strategy" shields the encyclopedia against vandalism (Shirky 135, 137). Wikis are platforms for groups to work together and protect the achievement and the product of their work providing that most participants are committed to those outcomes.

In a "historically informed ethnography of Wikipedia," Joseph Michael Reagle Jr. provides valuable insights into the practice, struggles and conflicts within Wikipedia's community and their importance in the attempt to make human knowledge accessible to world citizens. He traces the creation of Wikipedia to the first half of the twentieth century (Reagle 26). As Reagle says, Wikipedia is more than a mere multilingual reference site online (1). Wikipedia is a decentralized system that works in practice but not in theory (Reagle 3). It is a "Good Faith Collaboration", a community that thrives on the wiki ecosystem. Reagle further states that "…Treating others with respect is key to collaborating effectively in building an encyclopedia." He further states, "Consequently, civility acts as both a baseline for building a culture of good faith and as a last line of defense against escalation" (Reagle 67).

## 2. Kurdistan

In the following section, I will provide a brief overview of Kurdistan, its geographical location, its, more than a century-old struggle for independence, its language and culture. An overview of Kurdistan provides the reader with the basis for understating the ordeal that Kurds have experience which has ultimately affected many aspects of their lives, be it cultural, linguistic, political, educational and the like. As pertinent to the topic of the thesis, more emphasis is given to the linguistic development and calamities that the Kurdish language has

faced. Despite this, language is seen as a precursor of nation building and the strongest earmark of Kurdish cross-border Identity (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity*).

"… I am driven to the conclusion that no 'scientific definition' of a nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists. All that I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one" (Anderson 3).Albeit nonexistent on a conventional map, Kurdistan is more alive in the heart and minds of the Kurds than in the constitution of the countries—Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Armenia and Azerbaijan—that currently Kurdistan is a part of. Moreover, apart from limited ephemeral semi-autonomous local control such as Ardalan in the middle of the 19th century, there has never been an independent Kurdistan (Gunter xxviii). The hegemonic powers of those countries—Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria— have denied the existence of Kurds as an ethnic group, systematically suppressed the Kurdish language and identity and have never allowed any degree of self rule within their internationally defined borders. Any sort of political or social uprising has been retaliated with execution, prosecution and even genocide. Despite such atrocities, the Kurdish situation has improved significantly due to recent sociopolitical changes in the Middle East. For instance, in Iraq, since the collapse of Saddam Hussain, Kurds have been enjoying a quasi-state in which they can freely exercise their rights (Abdulla). In Turkey, because of the government's attempt to join the European Union, huge improvements have been achieved, as far as the Kurdish issue is concerned. In Syria, since Bashar Al Asad has lost control of the Kurdish areas, the Kurds can finally acknowledge their existence and stand up for their Kurdish identity amidst the turmoil that engulfs the whole country. In Iran, it seems that the Kurdish issue is successfully silenced by the Islamic regime, at least temporarily.

## 2.1 The land

Located in a contiguous area on the border of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Armenia and Azerbaijan; Kurdistan or homeland of the Kurds, covers a substantial area of the Middle East. Obtaining accurate statistics about Kurdistan is impossible, due to pro-Kurdish groups over-estimation and government efforts to undermine the significance of Kurdish issues. However, close to half (43%) of Kurdistan is located in Turkey or as Kurds call it, North Kurdistan; 31% in Iran or East Kurdistan, 18% in South Kurdistan or Iraq, 6% in Syria or West Kurdistan and 2% in former Soviet republics mainly Armenia and Azerbaijan (Gunter xxviii). The Zagros range runs across Kurdistan like a spine that stitches this torn land together. In fact, mountains are the most prominent geographical earmark of Kurdistan that set it apart from its neighboring lands.

Kurdistan has been forcibly divided twice in its recorded history. First, division happened in 1639, via a treaty between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, resulted in drawing the first official border between the two empires (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 50). The Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, resulted in the second division of Kurdistan and the creation of Turkey, Iran, Iran and Syria. The upshot of the latter accord was the establishment of internationally recognized borderlines that fragmented the Kurds in many different fronts, even today.

## 2.2 Population

With a population of between 25-30 million, Kurds form the largest stateless nation in the world (McDowall xi). The largest Kurdish population is in Turkey and the smallest in Syria. Kurds make up 23% of the total number of inhabitants in Turkey, 11% In Iran, 20% and 9% in Iraq and Syria respectively. Around 200,000 Kurds live in the former Soviet re-

publics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. Although the greatest number of Kurds

live in Kurdistan, a large group of Kurds inhabit the Iranian province of Khorasan, in Western

Europe and North America. It is estimated that one million Kurds live in diaspora, half of

which are in Germany (Gunter xxix).

### 2.3 Language

"The existence of a common language has played an important role in creating a

sense of solidarity among the Kurds, making it possible for them to think of themselves as a

community" (Koohi-Kamali 13). In other words, language has played a central role in the

Kurdish struggle. It is the prominent element that strengthens Kurdish national identity and

distinguishes the Kurds from other dominant ethnic groups: Persians, Arabs and Turks (Shey-

holislami, *Kurdish Identity* 160; Kreyenbroek 53). In spite of the fragmentation in the Kur-

dish language, culture and land, the language has helped to keep Kurdish collective identity

alive more than any other factor.

The governments of Iran, Turkey and Syria, have been fully aware of the significance

of the language, hence they have made numerous efforts, to varying degrees, to assimilate

Kurds via systematically suppressing the language and its development. For example, prior to

5-6 years ago, it was even prohibited to speak Kurdish in Turkey and Syria (Kreyenbroek 62).

In Iran, the Kurdish language is somehow tolerated but not for education, administration, or

any formal situation. That is, speaking Kurdish is not banned but for any formal setting, Far-

si— the official language of Iran— must be used (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 62).

Compared to other parts of Kurdistan, Kurdish has enjoyed more freedom in Iraq

even during and prior to Saddam Hussain's regime. In spite of that, the biggest advancement

pertaining to Kurdish language was achieved after the removal of Saddam. In other words,

Kurdish became the second official language in Iraq and the official language of the semi-au-

tonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (Khalil 3).

Although there are some disagreements among linguists both about the classification

of various Kurdish dialects and the categorization of the major dialects as separate languages,

I will adopt the terminologies used by scholars McDowall, Sheyholislami and Hassanpour. In

other words, the generally agreed term ''dialect" for sub branches of the Kurdish language

will be used throughout this thesis (McDowall 2004; Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity*).

"Kurdish is a western Iranian language, a member of the Iranian branch of the Indo-

European family of languages. It is therefore almost as different from Turkish and Arabic as

English and French, but very similar to Farsi, the national language of Iran" (Kreyenbroek

54). As divided as the nation itself, Kurdish is a politically fragmented language. Such divi-

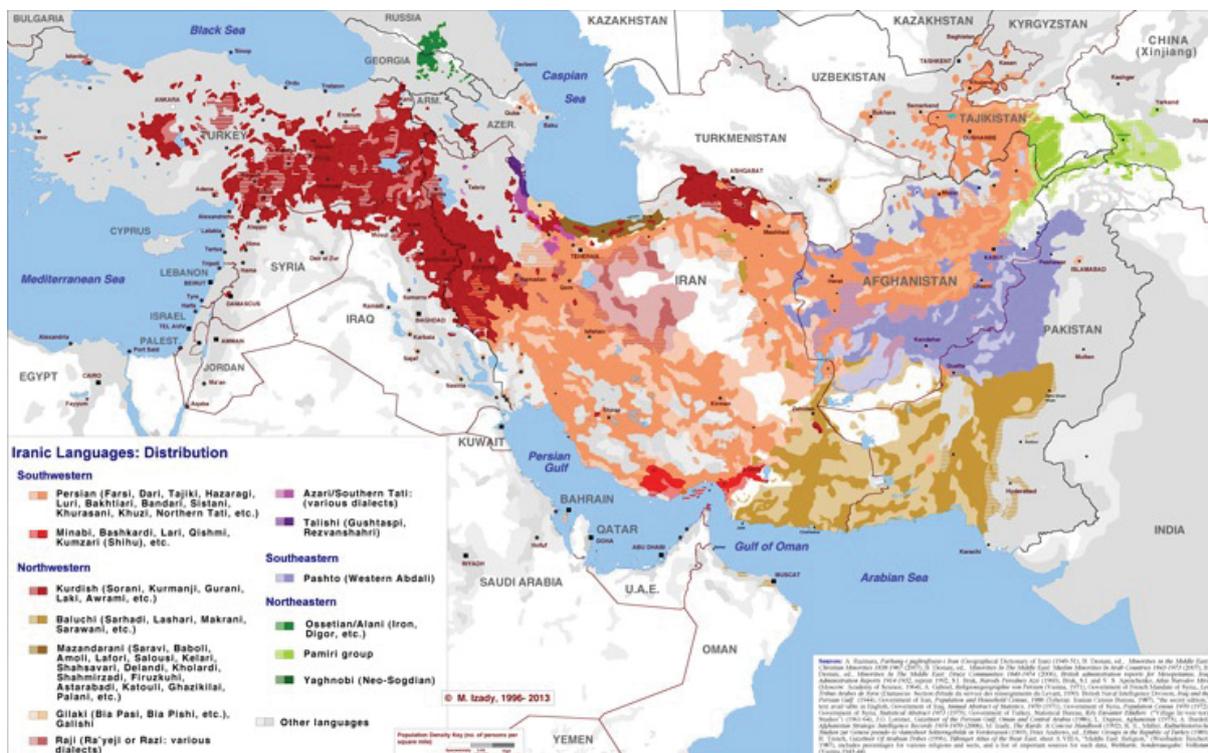sion is exacerbated by: its number of speech varieties, different writing systems, hegemonic,



Figure 2.1 Spread of Kurdish and other Iranic Languages ("Geographic
Distribution").

linguistic and cultural influence of those countries that Kurdistan is part of and by their policies to systematically suppress the Kurdish language. Kurdish has four dialects and two different writing systems.

Sorani and Kurmanji are the two widely spoken dialects that are spoken by the majority of Kurds. Approximately 60 percent of Kurds speak Kurmanji. It is spoken in Syria, Turkey and northern part of Kurdish speaking areas of Iran and Iraq, in Khorasan province of Iran, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 60). Sorani is spoken in southern parts of Kurdistan in areas located in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan. Zazaki (Dimli) and Gurani (Hewrami)[1] are the other two dialects of Kurdish with smaller number of speakers, compared to Sorani and Kurmanji. Zazaki is spoken in northern part of Kurdistan, in Turkey. Hewrami is used in parts of Kurdistan that are geographically located below Sorani-speaking areas (see fig. 2.1).

The discrepancy between major dialects can be quite stark at times. As Kreyenbroek argues, the reasons that Kurdish speech varieties could be dialects "...are their common origin, and the fact that this usage reflects the sense of ethnic identity and unity of the Kurds" (Kreyenbroek). He further argues that linguistically, they could be classified as different languages. Moreover, grammatically they are as different as German and English. For example, there are gender feminine and masculine nouns in Kurmanji but Sorani does not have gender. Nonetheless, as he argues "[the] differences in vocabulary and pronunciation are not as great as between German and English, but they are still considerable" (Kreyenbroek 55).

After the 19th century and the rise of the idea of nationalism, the Kurdish language gained more interest as a symbol of national earmark (McDowall). Although there are some instances of Kurdish literary work before the nineteenth century, Kurdish was mainly a spo-

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[1] These dialects are spelled as Soranî, Kurmancî, Zazakî and Goranî also.

ken language. To put more simply, Arabic, Turkish or Farsi were used for religious, literary work and administrative purposes (Kreyenbroek). In the early 1920s, Prince Celadet A.Bedir-Khan, heir to the ancient Bohtan principality of central Kurdistan, adopted the Roman alphabet for Kurmanji parallel to Ataturk's language reform (Vanly 117). Prior to that time, Arabic based script was used for writing Kurdish (Le Coq). Today, majority of Kurmanji speakers use Latin-based script for writing. However, Sorani is written in an adapted form of the Arabic script.

There has been some attempt to unify the two major dialects, e.g. Nabaz 1976, but they have not been successful due to "… grammatical differences between the two varieties, the absence of a unified state in Kurdistan, and the official repression against the language" (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 61). However many scholars have argued for the suitability of Latin-based script for writing Kurdish for both Sorani and Kurmanji. Tawfiq Wehbi, D. N. Makenzie, J. A. Bedir Khan, V. Minorsky, A.Hassanpour and J. Nebez are among those (Roshani). Nebez states that: "So much more important is the matter of a single, unified alphabet. I was, and still am, of the opinion that the Latin alphabet must be reformed and promoted. The promotion of the writing of the Kurdish language in the Latin alphabet does not mean that its writing in the Arabic-based scripts should be completely ignored."

## 2.4 Northern Kurdistan, Turkey

Although, in Turkey, the situation for Kurdish language and identity has slightly improved recently; history of Turkey is bound with the deprivation of the Kurds of their linguistic rights and as Skutnabb-Kangas calls it, it is " the most extreme form of linguistic oppression". Not entirely successful, successive governments in Turkey have been following a cen-

tury-old policy to eradicate Kurdish language and culture as "…[the] elimination of the Kurdish language is enacted in the Turkish Constitution and legislation" (Skutnabb-Kangas et al.). "Kemalist nationalism saw no place in the newly created republic, for anyone but Turks. In 1924 all Kurdish institutions such as schools and religious foundations, and also publications, were officially abolished" (Kreyenbroek 56). However, some serious Kurdish revolts happened between 1925-1930 that were brutally crushed by the Turkish government. Consequently, many Kurdish intellects fled to Syria, which was under French mandate, and continued to develop the language from there.

In 1938, a Kurdish revolt was suppressed in Dersim. The city was razed to the ground and was renamed to Tunceli (Kreyenbroek 57). From that point onward Kurdish was banned again and the words Kurd and Kurdistan were removed from the official vocabulary to be replaced by "mountain Turks".

The period 1938-61, as Kreyenbroek notes, was "…[the]most dangerous in recent history as far as the survival of Kurmanji in Turkey is concerned" (Kreyenbroek 57). Kurds were forced to speak Turkish outside their home or they would be marginalized from the society or even imprisoned for speaking Kurdish in public.[2] "The lack of educational facilities, publications and broadcasts in Kurdish naturally had its impact, and even [then] many educated Kurds who [were] ardent champions of the Kurdish cause, [found] it easier to express abstract ideas in Turkish " (Kreyenbroek).

Meanwhile, Kurdish literary work continued in Syria, which was under French mandate. Some periodicals were published in Kurmanji in Syria such as: *Roja Nû, Stêr* and *Ronahî*. Those materials were printed in Syria and would then be distributed in Turkey and inside Syria. Syria and Lebanon's independence made the situation unfavorable for Kurdish publi-

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[2] For more detailed account refer to *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*

cations. Therefore, Kurmanji publishing centers had to move out of those newly independent countries and find another location to continue their efforts in disseminating Kurdish. None of those neighboring countries i.e. Iran or Iraq would tolerate any Kurdish propaganda as they were busy suppressing their own Kurdish population. Thus, Kurdish activist had to find a location far from the Mideast. Consequently, Western Europe was chosen as an ideal location to pursue language standardization and dissemination.

During the 1960s and the time of mass work immigration, many workers emigrated to Germany from Turkey. Many of those immigrants were from the poor Kurdish inhabited areas of Turkey. Thus, Kurds found a new country from where they could continue their linguistic efforts in freedom, away from Turkey or Syria's prosecution. "In their new environment many of [those Kurds] became more politically aware, and felt freer to express their Kurdish identity" (Kreyenbroek 59). As a result, many materials were published in a relatively standardized Kurmanji including some short stories such as: *Şemo*, *Uzun* and a cultural journal called *Hêvî*.

As the matter of fact, "Kurmanji, in short, is one of the very few languages in the world whose modern standard form has so evolved almost entirely in exile." (Kreyenbroek 59). It should be mentioned that "[a]lthough the use of Kurdish was legalized in Turkey in May 1991…", but the Kurdish language and expressions in support of Kurdish culture/language are either overtly prohibited, or prohibited on the basis of being labeled "terrorist activities" (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 61, 62).

## 2.5 Southern Kurdistan, Iraq

Despite the fact that the Iraqi part of Kurdistan has witnessed the most atrocious violation of human rights, even genocide, compared to other parts of Kurdistan (Human Rights Watch); from the early 1920s, Iraqi Kurds have faced fewer difficulties when it comes to language development and dissemination compared to other parts of Kurdistan. Different levels of education from elementary to high school were available in Kurdish, even during Saddam's era. Many different publications and media outlets were allowed to disseminate in Kurdish. But since 1991, Kurdish has seen a greater level of freedom and as a result, higher education was also made available in Kurdish. However, as mentioned earlier, after 2003, the Kurdish language has gained the status of begin the second official language of Iraq beside Arabic.

## 2.6 Eastern Kurdistan, Iran

Language wise, in Eastern Kurdistan conditions have neither been as severe as in Turkey nor as liberal as in Iraq. Although it is not forbidden to speak Kurdish or practice Kurdish traditions, the right to education in mother tongue has never found any place in contemporary Iran. Certain publication such as books, magazine and radio/television programs are available under severe censorship from the government. Education in modern tongue is allowed by the constitution (Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity* 62), but in reality, as it was expressed in recent announcement by Persian Language Academy— official body of persian language regulator and policy maker— Kurdish-medium schools are viewed as a threat to the Iranian identity and national integrity, hence they should never be allowed to exist (Vali).

**2.7 Western Kurdistan, Syria**

Compared to Iran, Iraq or Turkey, a much smaller number of Kurds live in Syria. In spite of that, they make up the largest minority group in the country. Under French mandate, many Kurdish publications were printed in Syria, and then were distribute both inside Syria and Turkey. Whereas, after Syria's independence and during the Baathist Party rule, Kurds were under severe suppression. For example, the regime "…prohibited the registration of children with Kurdish first names. Kurdish cultural centers, bookshops, and similar activities [were] banned" (Gunter xxxix). Since 2011 and the national uprising in Syria, Kurds have some degree of independence, so they could start educating Kurds in their mother tongue (Zurutuza; "Syria profile"; "Kurdish Language School").

To sum up, as Matras and Reershemius described it "[i]n fact, the majority of Kurds in Iran, Syria and Turkey are illiterate in their native tongue. In these countries official policy has prevented the autonomous development of a literary variety by denying Kurds education in their own language as well as the right to distribute printed material in Kurdish. Linguistic and literary projects have thus been restricted to clandestine activities of opposition move-ments".

# 3. Wikipedia

## 3.1 Inception

The idea of creating a world encyclopedia as a human knowledge repository dates back to the pre-Internet and computer era. Its heritage traces back to the beginning of the twentieth century to Paul Otlet's Universal Repertory and H. G. Wells's concept of a World

Brain (Reagle 3, 26). Wells spoke of his vision for world encyclopedia via which world citizens could use universal information to solve global problems and contribute to world peace. He believed that although such encyclopedia cannot solve every single problem humankind faces, but without such world encyclopedia "…to hold men's minds together in something like a common interpretation of reality, there is no hope whatever of anything but an accidental and transitory alleviation of any of our world troubles " (Wells). Despite these visions and ideas, a successful realization of such knowledge depot, with the scale and magnitude that we experience today, could arguably never have been possible without the reach and networkability of the Internet and Wiki technology.

Based on the holy trinity —no original resource, neutral point of view, and verifiability— Wikipedia is the world's largest general-knowledge encyclopedia online that operates to make the sum of human knowledge accessible to world's citizens free of charge. As a crowd-sourced website, Wikipedia is the world's sixth-most-popular and most visited websites according to Alexa. Wikipedia is a free encyclopedia in a sense that no one pays for using it or contributing to its content. It is free as different views can be freely published on different topics. It is free in that there is almost no top-down authority to mandate the importance or relevance of an article or a section of it. It is free as no one single person decides on its growth and development.

Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger cofounded Wikipedia and officially launched it on 15 January 2011 ("History of Wikipedia"). The website was launched via using wiki technology which was pioneered in 1995 by Ward Cunningham. In its inception, Wikipedia was intended to complement Nupedia, another online encyclopedia that was edited by experts. But it quickly took over Nupedia and became more popular. In March 2002, not long after its success,

Larry Sanger left Wikipedia due to his disagreement with Jimmy Wales over how edits and disputes should be handled on the encyclopedia. Larry believed that expert users still needed to monitor editing process, but Wales had a more liberal view on the website's governance and how disputes should be handled. In 2006, Larry established another encyclopedia, an authoritative expert-driven reference website, called Citizendium in which contributors use their real names and the website is managed via "gentle expert guidance" to increase accuracy of its content.

Wikipedia's Wiki platform enables asynchronous and incremental editing through discussion and collaboration and occasionally in conflict and disagreement or even "edit wars". Interestingly enough, on average, conflicts grow more and faster than the articles themselves (Reagle 8). Thanks to wiki technology, Wikipedians find a platform auspicious to transparent edits and contributions from many individuals. Anyone around the world, even without registration, can add or remove content from articles. Additionally, behind every article there is a page dedicated to discussion among those who contribute to the article. It is the backend of the articles so to say, it is where articles are shaped and the decision about their content is decided upon.

### 3.2 Statistics

As of April 2014, this website offers 31.3 million articles in 287 languages. The languages include some of the most advanced languages all the way to the least resourced ones. English Wikipedia is by far the most comprehensive among all other languages. On average, the Main page of the English Wikipedia alone receives approximately eight million global views every day, that is 60.56% of total visitors (Alexa.com). A print version of the English

Wikipedia comprising 1000 volumes and 1,100,000 pages will be exhibited in 2014 by German Wikipedia contributors. Dutch, German, Swedish and French are among the top languages with the highest number of articles. Herero[3] is the least resourced language among all other language editions. Kurdish is among the group of the languages with 10000+ articles."On average, Wikipedia receives a total of 10 billion global page views from around 495 million unique visitors every month, including 85 million visitors from the United States alone…("History of Wikipedia"). Visitors spend around 4 minutes on the website (Alexa.com).

Wikipedia articles cover manifold of topics, from classical music to TV series to political figures and companies. Articles vary substantially in terms of length, number of edits, language and quality. Moreover, popularity of a given topic largely determines the length, quality and the number of edits in its corresponding article. In other words, the more popular the topic, the more edits it begets and consequently the higher the quality of its article. Similarly, more controversial topics generate more discussions and more disagreements, to a point that discussion pages sometimes grow more and faster than their article pages (Reagle 9).

### 3.3 Policies and Guidelines

"[Wikipedia] is no more immune to human nature than any other utopian project… Curiously, though, mob rule has not led to chaos. Wikipedia, which began as an experiment in unfettered democracy, has sprouted [its own] policies and procedures" (Schiff). In principal, there are three levels of authority in Wikipedia: Essays, which are non-authoritative pages that contain useful information and insights; Guidelines, these are flexible norms that

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[3] A language spoken in parts of Namibia and Angola.

are decided upon consensus, they are negotiable and can be changed; Policies, these are the official rules of the encyclopedia and are less likely to be changed or modified. There are many norms in Wikipedia, but Generally speaking, the "Five Pillars" seem to sum up succinctly the encyclopedia's collaboration norms: Wikipedia is an encyclopedia; Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view; Wikipedia is free content that anyone can edit, use, modify and distribute; Editors should treat each other with respect and civility; Wikipedia does not have firm rules ("Wikipedia:Five Pillars"). Consequently, civility acts as both a baseline for building a culture of good faith and as a last line of defense against escalation (Reagle 67).

### 3.4 Criticism

Wikipedia attracts those who criticize the website and others who accolade the efforts being conducted by Wikipedians and their online community. Some of the criticism targets the expert versus amateur debate and how the encyclopedia publishes non-expert's view on variety of topics. Experts like Jaron Lanier, believe Wikipedia and some other wiki-based platforms are taking away authority of an expert and will give it to a crowd that doesn't even have an inherent voice.

Consequently, Lanier argues that, Wikipedia and some other wiki-based platforms are taking away authority of an expert and will give it to a crowd that doesn't even have an inherent voice. He conjectures that Wikipedia is still in the development phase and it doesn't have the agency that a formal knowledge dissemination body intrinsically possesses. On the contrary, Shirky argues that: the process and the fact that Wikipedia is a work in progress makes this encyclopedia unique and more effective than other similar sources (Shirky

119).Being under constant evolution makes the information current and relevant, a feature that other encyclopedias find rather hard to maintain or even obtain.

According to Lanier, the "no original research" principle of Wikipedia is a problematic feature of the encyclopedia for a major reason: "most of the technical or scientific information that is in the Wikipedia was already on the Web before the Wikipedia was started". Andrew Keen calls Wikipedia " the blind leading the blind" which has no editor or reporter and consequently it provides the reader with "perpetuating cycle of misinformation and ignorance" (Keen 4). He further criticizes Wikipedia and other attempts based on "wisdom of crowd" saying: "[we should] say good-bye to today's experts and cultural gatekeepers—our reporters, news anchors, editors, music companies, and Hollywood movie studios." He argues that "[i]n today's cult of amateur, the monkeys are running the show" (Keen 9).

## 3.5 Systemic Bias

Although "Neutral Point of View" is one of the element of Wikipedia's "Holy Trinity"—"Neutral Point of View", "No Original Research," and "Verifiability"— the encyclopedia is not immune against bias (Reagle 141). Additionally, "[t]he common characteristics of average Wikipedians inevitably color the content of Wikipedia". In other words, the encyclopedia reflects the character of its contributors. According to a study, most of Wikipedia's contributors are young male, between the age of 15-49. Half those contributors hold an undergraduate degree and they are from the northern hemisphere (Reagle 94). Thus, in the process of providing content for Wikipedia, women, different cultural and ethnic groups are underrepresented.

Digital divide is another factor contributing to the bias. As computer and Internet access is required to contribute to Wikipedia's content. Therefore, those from developing countries, the elderly and those who do not possess a computer are underrepresented. Moreover, contribution to content generally needs some technical knowledge, editors tend to be technologically driven individuals.

As Michael Snow and Jimmy Wales said: "Less than a fifth of the world's population has access to the Internet. While hundreds of thousands of volunteers have contributed to Wikimedia projects today, they are not fully representative of the diversity of the world. Many choices lie ahead as we work to build a world wide movement to create and share free knowledge ("Wikipedia:Systemic bias").

# 4. Kurdish Wikipedia

There are three different versions of Kurdish Wikipedia that are based on three dialects of Kurdish. As can be observed, the fragmentation in the Kurdish language is rather evident here on Wikipedia as well. As a result, Kurdish Wikipedia is not as integrated or as developed as one might expect. That is, as will be demonstrated, most articles are not more than "stubs", and those that are, are not thorough enough to provide the user with a general overview of their titles. Consequently, "stubs" do not provide enough martial for edit, as there is not much to edit in the first place. As a result, the corresponding "Talk" sections are even more deserted than the article itself.

In fact, out of the 100 Kurdish articles studied, only eight are accompanied by some sort of discussion. It can be argued that Kurdish Wikipedia articles are generally underdeveloped and it seems to have even a more dormant community. As Shirky states "… a wiki is a

hybrid of tool and community. Wikipedia, and all wikis, grow if enough people car about them. And the die if they don't" (Shirky 136). Further more, different writing systems, lack of a standard language, variety of dialects, lack of literacy in mother tongue and digital divide are some of the reason for Kurdish Wikipedia's underdevelopment.

Kurdish Wikipedia with its three branches that represent three dialects of Kurdish: Kurmanji, Sorani and Dlimi, is one of the versions of the encyclopedia. It was first created in March 2004, and it gradually expanded. First, Kurmanji was created and then Sorani was added. In the beginning, Sorani and Kurmanji were published under the Kurmanji section of Wikipedia, but in 2009 due to different writing systems and some other technical, linguistic and communicative difficulties, they were separated and continued operating independent from one another (" هۆکارەکانی"). Zazaki version is the youngest Kurdish edition of Wikipedia.

As of April 2014, with just over 20,000 articles, Kurmanji has the largest number of articles in Kurdish followed by Sorani and Zazaki with 13,775 and 4,392 articles respectively. Sorani is written in Arabic based system as its written in print and other online venues. On the contrary, although majority of Kurmanji speakers write in Latin script, Kurmanji on Wikipedia is written in both Arabic and Latin based writing system. This function can be selected via a tab next to "Gotûbêj" or "Discussion" called, "disable" section of every article. Zazaki is published entirely using Latin script.

The Kurdish version of Wikipedia is not as vibrant nor as extended as it should/could be. Most of the articles studied do not possess the length or detail —compared to their English versions— that one might expect from a Wikipedia article. Those articles studied for the purpose of this thesis, do not provide enough basic content about the title of the article. Overall, the breadth of coverage in Kurdish articles are relatively limited compared to other well-

developed versions of the encyclopedia. A simple metric like word count, albeit not a vigor-

ous test of an article's quality, could be an initial test of an article's caliber. To get a rough

estimate of the quality of articles available in Kurdish, 150 articles—in all three dialects—

were selected via "Random article" option. The average word count of those articles was 113

words. To clarify, there are 18 billion words in 31 million articles on Wikipedia which means

that on average an article contains 580.64 words ("Wikipedia:Size comparisons"). Thus, an

average article in Kurdish falls significantly below the average article word count. Among

those articles studied, the minimum word count was 4 and maximum 2278. Overall, 19 arti-

cles out of 150 were above 200 words (see fig. 4.1).

| Dialect | Average word count | Over 200 word |
|---------|--------------------|---------------|
| Kurmanji | 144.75 | 9 |
| Sorani | 141.67 | 8 |
| Dilmi | 53.36 | 2 |
| Total | 113.26 | 19 |

Figure 4.1. Average word count in 150 Kurdish articles studied

Depth "…is a rough indicator of a Wikipedia's quality", which shows how often its

articles are updated. However, It does not refer to academic quality of a given article ("List of

Wikipedias"). In other words, "depth" is how frequently articles are edited and how active the

Wikipedians are in a specific Language. The following table illustrates a comparison of five

different versions of Wikipedia: English, Kurdish and Farsi. English is chosen, as it is the

most rigorous and the most popular Wikipedia. Additionally, Persian is chosen because Farsi

is the closest language to Kurdish. As can be seen from the data, English has the highest

number of articles and consequently most depth and editors as well. Soranî and Kurmanjî

yielded 155 and 27 respectively as compared with 173 of Persian. Number of admins—across

all three Kurdish version—and active users are substantially lower compared to other lan-

guages. Zazaki has the lowest number of articles, but it has highest depth level (see fig. 4.2).

| № | Language | Wiki | Articles | Total | Edits | Admins | Users | Active Users | Images | Depth |
|---|----------|------|----------|-------|-------|--------|-------|--------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | English | en | 4,504,42 8 | 32,786,355 | 714,638,63 7 | 1,408 | 21,257,796 | 129,41 4 | 831,53 9 | 859 |
| 19 | Persian | fa | 388,233 | 2,220,709 | 17,288,729 | 26 | 409,560 | 2,848 | 26,622 | 173 |
| 10 0 | Kurmancî | ku | 20,370 | 49,167 | 653,904 | 6 | 20,129 | 68 | 684 | 27 |
| 11 2 | Soranî | ckb | 13,775 | 94,903 | 425,157 | 2 | 14,000 | 80 | 301 | 155 |
| 15 4 | Zazaki | diq | 4,392 | 193,39 | 346,742 | 2 | 10,316 | 46 | 214 | 208 |

Figure 4.2. Depth comparison based on language ("List of Wikipedias").

What is more striking is the low number of active users in Kurdish and it is hardly surprising

that the Kurdish Wikipedia is substantially dormant compared to its sister versions ("List of

Wikipedias"). Although there are some advantages to having three different sections dedicat-

ed to a single language, the drawbacks by far outweigh the benefits. First, as different Kur-

dish dialects operate independent form one another, they have articles in different length and

content. While this method enriches the material written on or about a given subject, as

demonstrated above, it generally yields articles that are too short, or contain no discussion or

edit. On the other hand, combination of all these three articles could produce a more detailed,

high quality article. Once such rigorous articles are written, they could be translated in the

other dialects.

Another issue that is pertinent to Kurmanji is the confusion in the discussion section.

Kurmanji articles in Wikipedia are written in both Arabic and Roman alphabet which could

be advantageous for those Kurmanji speakers that use Roman or Arabic script and it will be a

way to help them gain information in the script they are familiar with. However, it creates confusion and inconsistency in the discussion page. A mix of discussions— written in different writing systems on the same page—can be difficult to read or understand let alone engaging enough for users to contribute. Moreover, some of the articles only have discussions in one script, not the other. This illustrates the inconsistency in the Kurdish Wikipedia that probably discourages users and undermines the credibility of Kurdish Wikipedia. Thus, users will turn to Wikipedia in other languages they speak.

## 4.1 Case studies

Two radically different subjects were chosen for the purpose of content analysis and the discussions that help shape the articles. Wikipedia's discussion sections are important components in the encyclopedia's ecosystem. They are the back-ends or the processes through which various articles are edited, shaped and debated for variety of reasons and improvement such as, grammar, reference and the like. To provide a basis for quality, depth and language comparison: English, Kurdish (Sorani, Zazaki and Kurmanji) and Persian version of the two chosen articles were selected. One of the articles is on a neutral subject with little or no potential for controversy. On the contrary, the other article is of a highly political nature. They were selected to provide a comparison in their content and pertinent discussion sections. Needless to say, due to the fluid nature of Wikipedia, those articles can look completely different in the future. It is worth mentioning that it was relatively difficult to find an article in the three dialects of Kurdish that had enough material to be analyzed.

### 4.1.1 First Case Study, Potato

An article under the title "Potato" was chosen to be analyzed due to its lack of partiality potential. For the purpose of this analysis: Sorani, Kurmanji, Zazaki, English and Persian versions were intended to be studied. It should be mentioned that, although all the articles are
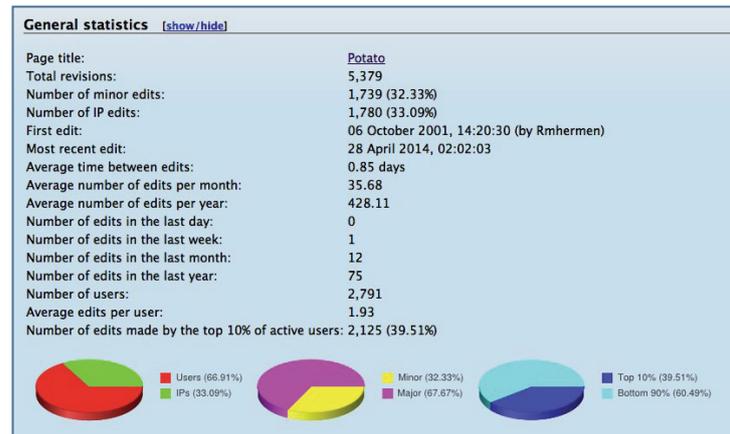


Figure 4-3. Screen shot form "Potato" article statistics ("Potato").

about the same subject, potato, they differ significantly in terms of length, number and frequency of edits, number of active users and more importantly, their related discussion section. The English article is the most comprehensive one. As a result, it has the most detailed "Talk" section. In contrast, Kurmanji version is the shortest and Zazaki version is not created



Figure 4.4. Screen shot form "پەتاتە" article. Sorani Version of

"Potato" article.

yet. It can be argued that the Kurdish editions of this article are inchoate and are accompanied by minute discussion page that is available only in Kurmanji.

The English version of the article, "Potato" is almost 13 years old. It was created on October 6, 2001. Since its inception it has been edited, on average, more than once every day. Moreover, the total number of edits are 5, 379 of which the latest happened on April 28, 2014
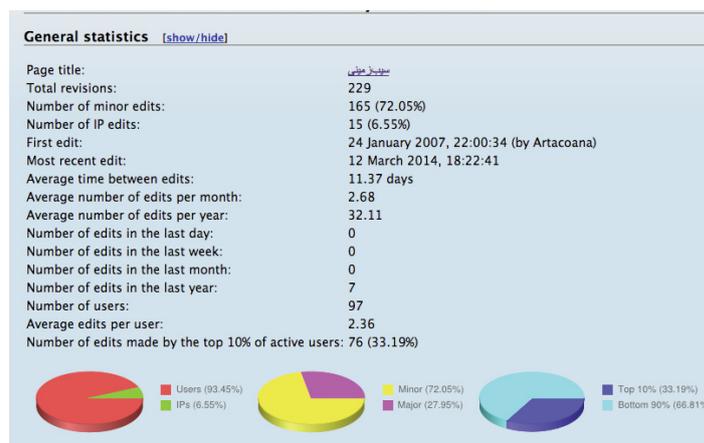


Figure 4.5. Screen shot form "سیبزمینی" article. Persian Version of "Potato" article.

at 02:02:03. The article has 2,791 users and around 40% of edits has been made by less than 10% of the users. User "zzuuzz" has done the highest number of edits of 90 (see fig. 4.3). Page length (in bytes) is 87,282 and the article consists of 8195 words and over 100 refer-ences ("Potato").

The Sorani version, as can be seen, was first created in 2007 and its most recent edit was on January 24, 2014. In total it has been edited 115 times so far out of which one editor was an unregistered user. It comprises 449 words with only one source and no information in the discussion page ("پەتاتە"). Kurmanji version was created on 21 June 2005, but the number of edits could not be retrieved (see fig. 4.4). It has 303 words and about two sentences in the discussion page ("Kartol"). Zazaki version does not exist.

Persian version of the article was first created on January 24, 2007 and since then it has been edited 229 times less than 10% of which is done by none registered users of Wikipedia. The article contains 953 words and six references. Moreover, around 33% of total number of edits was done by top 10% of the users (see fig. 4.5). On average, it has been edited about every eleventh day ("سیب زمینی").

Orthographic inconsistency is one of the salient problems that the Kurdish language grapples with. Although exists both online and offline, this issue is more prominent online and specifically in instances when words normally written in the Arabic-based script are transferred to be written in the Latin script. The confusion ensued due to this inconstancies pervade both in the Kurdish versions and other Roman language versions of Wikipedia such as English. For example, the City of Kirkuk that is spelled Karkuk, Kerkuk and Kerkûk. Another example of this orthographic disparity is in the word "potato" which has sixteen different variations in Kurdish Wikipedia: kartol, qompîr, kepole, pulge, petetêz, petetîz, petete, petat, سێوەزەمینی، سێوی زەمینی، یەرەلماسی، سێۆک، سێوک، سێوەعەرزیله، سێفەزەمینی. In brief, in two Kurdish articles on Wikipedia there are around 20 different spellings of the two Kurdish words just in the articles title.
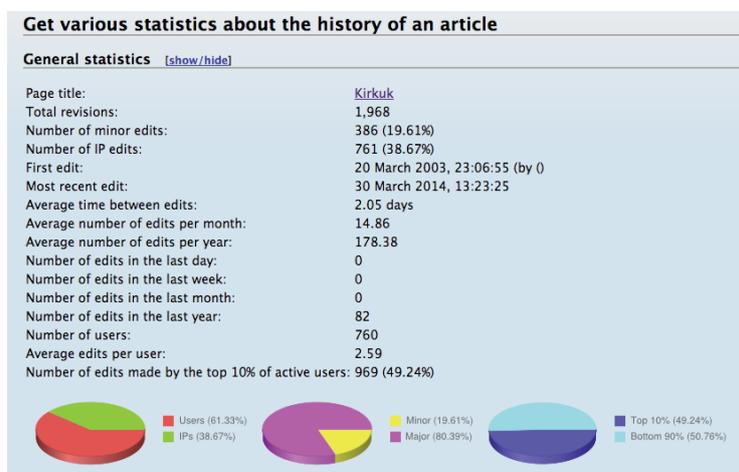


Figure 4.6. Screen shot form "Kirkuk" article statistics.

**4.1.2 Second Case Study, Kirkuk**

The other case is about a highly controversial topic. It was chosen presuming it had

caused a lot of edit wars and arguments on its related Wikipedia page. The article is about a

disputed oil-rich city called Kerkûk in Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurdish, English and Persian versions

of the article were analyzed to get an estimate of the depth of their information and the way

the discussions were handled. Surprisingly, the English edition is by far the most comprehen-

sive among all other versions and as a result it has the longest discussion page.

The English version of the article was created on 20 March, 2003 and its most recent

edit was conducted on 30 March 2014. It has been revised 1,968 times which is about two

days between every edit. Approximately half of its edits was made by 10% of the users. For

the creation of this article every user, on average, has contribute with 2 edits. The article con-

tains 3,771 words and around 50 references (see fig. 4.6).

The "Talk" section in the article is interesting as it reflects some of the long disputed

issues among Kurds, Arabs, Turks and other ethnic groups in the city over the demographic

composition of this city. For example, a user Bunifa88 says: "Wikipedia shouldn't be a place

for political lies. This aricle[sic] is not objective when mentioning Iraqi Turks and their influ-

ence. There are at LEAST 2 million Iraqi Turks living in Kirkuk, and historically Kirkuk is

no Kurdish city. see: http://kirkuk.us". This user's claim was not answered by the time of this

writing. Another instance is. "TO ALL READERS All information in Wikipedia fabricated

and does not worth to read. I think they get money from Kurdish group to change the facts.

Fake information about Kirkuk, wikipedia owners are kurds" (Infrogmation). From that point

onward the discussion is escalating to insults and accusing the article being biased. User

DanielRigal states: "It seems that there is a lot of ethnic bickering and we have the content of

the article being changed without references to back it up. Some edits big up the Kurds and

do down the Turkmen and some big up the Turkmen and do down the Kurds." Finally, anoth-

er Wikipedia user, Gabriel Stijena tries to calm the dispute and refer others to Wikipedia's

NPOV by stating: "It's ordinary and natural that all of them claim the right for Kirkuk, which

is a historical and cultural city with a diversity of four ethnic groups. We should observe the



Figure 4.7. Screen shot form "کەرکووک" article Kurdish version of "Kirkuk"

article from a neutral point of view as the outsiders" (Gabriel Stijena).

When it comes to the Kurdish edition, the Sorani version covers a lot of aspects relat-

ed to the city such as its quarters, its oil industry, demographic composition, its celebrities,

famous people and many more. This version contains some information irrelevant to the city

but important to Kurdistan history. It seems that this version is written with some degree of

proclivity towards Kurdish viewpoint of the city. In other words, it presents a pro-Kurdish

version of the city where it allocates a big deal of article to the animosity of Turkish govern-

ment toward the Kurdish movement in general. The striking element is that there is only one

source mentioned in the entire article whereas the English version lists over 50 references. As

it says in the beginning of the article: "This article has not referred to any source or reference.

Please, by providing credible references, make this article better. A text without a reference

might be removed or asked to be provided with relevant reference" ("کەرکووک", my trans).

Sorani version was created on January 18, 2007, and since then it has been edit 158 times.

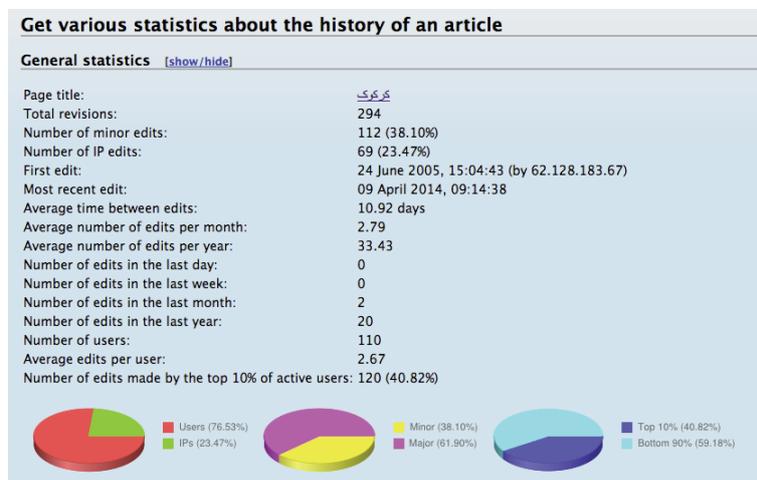The latest edit was on 13 April 2014 (see fig. 4.7).



Figure 4.8. Screen shot form "كركوك" article Persian version of "Kirkuk"

The debate section in Sorani only contains a comment by one user who complains

about orthographic confusion over the name of the city saying:

> Please, let's know how this city is called. I am confused, the Kurdish language
>
> institute [not clear what he/she means by this] has not decided how "Heart of
>
> Kurdistan"— as it is called in Kurdish— should be written. Kurdistan, the
>
> language is the national identity. Advancing the language is serving humanity
>
> before is serves nationalism. Because of that we need to standardize our sweet
>
> mother tongue ("79.102.143.186", my trans).

Kurmanji version of the article is rather short, of about 575 words, and without any reference

for such a critical topic. But it refers the reader to Sorani version for both the article and dis-

cussion. Zazaki version doesn't exist.

Persian version covers the most important aspects pertinent to the city of Kirkuk, but

focuses more on its history. It is a 980-word article with 20 references. It was first created on

June 24, 2005 and it has been edit 294 time of which April 09, 2014 is the latest. Around 40% of the contribution to the article comes from 10% of the users (see fig. 4.8).

The "Talk" section contains some additional information and some discussion over different parts of the article and what to be included. For example, user 92.50.37.164, has removed an image that she or her was sure that didn't belong to the city and argues that "there is a river crossing the city in the picture, but no such river cross the city in reality." The user continues that "although I have removed the image a couple of times, but my edit was reverted by other users and the image was put in the article again. If there is a valid reference for that image I would be happy to see it…" (my trans). Accordingly, after 39 minutes, user Samək responds and the image was removed permanently.

As can be seen from these two case studies above, it can be argued that the articles are frequently edited and updated, regardless of the level of improvement. Moreover, Kurdish versions are inchoate, even about significant issues related to Kurdish issues, with little or no discussion.

## 5. The Role of Kurdish Wikipedia

Crowdsourcing is a model that attracts motivated individuals that can provide "…solutions superior in quality and quantity to those that even traditional forms of business can " (Appadurai). Moreover, crowds can solve problems that corporate scientific researchers are incapable of overcoming. Additionally, as Brabham argues, crowdsourcing is an online, distributed problem solving and production model via which the collective intelligence of an online community is used for a specific purpose ("The Myth"). Based on "collective intelligence" of its community, Wikipedia can provide a language standardization model that other

semi-official or nonofficial bodies who work to standardize the Kurdish language have been unable to deliver.

However, it is generally believed that language planning and standardization is a top-to-bottom process initiated and maintained by governments. Hence, little or no input should come form the bottom to the top (Kamwendo). In other words, standardization of a language takes place after the establishment of a country. Once a sovereign nation state comes into existence, efforts are made to create a unified means of communication. Such unified code once decided upon, is disseminated and strengthened via mass communication—be it newspaper, radio, television, a dedicated language institution, or recently, the Internet. Moreover, a standardized national language is considered as an indispensable identity element of a sovereign state (Matras and Reershemius); an element that distinguishes a nation from others more than any other factor. Thus, it can be argued that establishment of a nation is a precursor to national language code construction or at least conducive to spreading it in tandem with the development of the state.

However, the Kurdish language has not enjoyed such auspicious circumstances. First, there has never been an independent Kurdish government to conduct a fully fledged language planning campaign. Second, efforts to standardize the language or unify the writing systems have not yielded any tangible, practical outcome. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, those states that rule over Kurdistan have taken myriads of repressive measures to assimilate the Kurdish language, let alone facilitating its development. Thus, most of the efforts for standardizing Kurdish have been conducted in exile, predominantly in Western Europe (Vanly). This is more evident in Kurmanji, as explored in earlier sections, which has been the subject of severe restrictions. In contrast, the situation for Sorani has been relatively more favorable within Kurdistan. As a result, most of its standardization efforts have been conducted in Iraqi

Kurdistan. In spite of this, and more than twenty years of semi-independent rule of KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government) in Iraqi Kurdistan, no successful approach has been adopted to standardize the language, or fully integrate and unify the writing system (Roshani).

Standardization is concerned with linguistic forms as well as the communicative and social aspects of a language. Additionally, standard languages are discursive project accompanied by the development of specific discourse practices. These discourses emphasize the primacy of writing and the idea of national language as the only legitimate language of the speech community. Moreover, Deumert argues, "Standardization can be conceptualized as a movement towards linguistic uniformity through competition-selection process". She further states that standardization is not only conducted by regulating authorities, "…but also processes of cumulative micro-accommodation, leveling and dialect convergence, which are the outcome of the everyday linguistic activities of individuals" (Deumert 2,3).

Wikipedia can be used as a platform conducive to advancing the Kurdish language standardization process and help keeping its written form thriving and current. That is, Wikipedia creates an ecosystem favorable to stages of language standardization and implementation via: "Articles", as the foundation of the encyclopedia, and through the "Talk" pages where Wikipedia's content is shaped, edited and debated. The latter is the back-end of Wikipedia's content. It is where policies are decided upon through interaction and discussion within the community. The former is where the policies are enacted and changes are implemented.

On the one hand, this model resembles the language standardization that has been adopted for quite some time. That is, language planning is organized by an institution and then implemented via mainstream use or media outlets. On the other hand, this model not only differs significantly, but it is a more effective method of standardizing the Kurdish lan-

guage, due to its unique circumstance, because: First, it gives non-expert speakers of the language the opportunity to be involved in both language planning and policy making process. Second, it blurs the boundaries between implementation and "norm selection", which in turn expedites standardization and adoption by the public. Third, it provides a substantially wide reach for neutral knowledge dissemination. Fourth, it helps to bring the different dialects of Kurdish closer via creating an interlink between them, hence facilitating word transfer. Fifth, it helps to unify different Kurdish writing systems, thus promoting written Kurdish. Finally, as the ultimate intended outcome of standardization, it makes communication among speakers of different Kurdish dialects easier and creates a platform for discursive constructions and strengthening of Kurdish national identity. Such bottom-up transformation is made possible via tapping into the power and "wisdom of crowds", the sociability of web 2.0 and wiki technology.

Wikipedia's ecosystem is an unmatched online venue for unifying Kurdish writing systems, norm selection, corpus planning, status planning, resolving orthographic confusion and inconsistencies in the Kurdish language and more importantly, gradual implementation of those changes. Wikipedia offers a unique platform that allows every user to witness the norm selection process, get involved and voice her/his opinion on what can/should be selected. Moreover, this is an unparalleled opportunity because most norm selections or language policies are conducted without ordinary citizen or users of the language being able to influence the policies in any way but in deciding whether to adopt those changes.

On the contrary, on Wikipedia, users can express their opinion about a word choice or a selected norm which can eventually influence the selection process and/or outcome. An example is a discussion that happened on Kurdish Wikipedia in the "Talk" section of an article called, "سەرچاوە" or "reference". In this discussion users are debating what the correct Kur-

dish translations of words "reference", "citation", "source" and "bibliography" would be. After some discussion back and forth, users eventually reach a consensus and decide what words to use for Kurdish equivalent of those English words. Worth focusing on is not only the correct corresponding word in Kurdish, but the discussion and the fact that a selected vocabulary will be immediately used in writing an article. Hence, the direct result of their argument is shown in the body of the article they debate about.

"Language planning is ultimately judged not by its small coterie of specialized language planners but, most crucially, by its intended consumers" (Fishman, *Don't Leave Language* xi). In other words, success and effectiveness of any language standardization policy, to a great extent, depends on the willingness of the public and different media outlets to implement the selected changes. That is, if the public is reluctant to utilized selected norms, standardization will be hindered if not permanently ignored. No matter how sophisticated or beneficial language policies are in theory, it is their adoption in the mainstream media, especially writing, that determines their success rate and effectiveness. For example, there has been several attempts to unify Kurdish writing systems, but none of those attempts has been adopted by the public and as a result, never got to the implementation phase (Sheyholislami 61; Roshani).

One of the most recent attempts is the "unified writing system" suggested by Kurdish Academy of Languages (KAL). At KAL, they have designed a system of writing based on Latin script that on the one hand, resolves the shortcomings of current Latin-based system for writing Sorani. On the other hand, they have suggested too many changes to the current Latin-based system that is used by majority of Kurds. Consequently, KAL's system accommodates the language needs, but due to the amount of change they have offered and dearth of KAL's presence in the Kurdish mainstream media, it is only seen on their website.

Matras and Reershemius define two elements as precursor of institutionalized promotion of written minority languages: utilizing the unified form in written variety and an extensive reach to consumer. Moreover, they argue that popular distribution channel i.e. periodicals, radio or TV programs are more effective than martial published by language academies or academic researchers. For example, "[t]he Kurdish Institute in Paris is considered to be the most competent authority on language matters, but its suggestions and recommendations usually do not reach the majority of editors in the more widely distributed periodicals" (Matras and Reershemius). As they further argue, groups of institution who run norm selection, codification and standardization, do not necessarily have higher authority than those who implement those changes. Thus, constant unresolved issues come up between those groups involved in standardization process.

However, the role and the importance of academic authorities as respected resources in language planning cannot be denied, "…but access to a wide public of consumers is likely to have a definite advantage"(Matras and Reershemius). In case of using Wikipedia as a platform to standardizing the language the latter is a given. That is, Wikipedia as the most popular collaborative authoring platform, has the widest reach among all other encyclopedias and more importantly, at least more than of all Kurdish resources. As Biuk-Aghai et al. argue Wikipedia's large-scale human-to-human collaboration involves millions of authors that write millions of articles on variety of subjects. Additionally, as explored in previous sections, some popular articles could be the work of hundreds and even thousand of co-authors at the same time.

According to Ferguson, standardization should be considered as a unification of language that affects both written and spoken forms. On the other hand, other linguists, like Rye, offer a more liberal approach to standardization which consists of one standard unified form

for writing, grammar and lexicon and the existence of some other vernacular speech varieties (Matras and Reershemius). Although the latter approach fits better within the context of the Kurdish language than the former, it is still unable to accommodate all the needs and challenges the Kurdish language faces due to its multidialectal nature, as mentioned earlier.

Hassanpour argues, that one standard alone belies the Kurdish language and as he calls it: replaces current problem of "language chauvinism" with "dialectal chauvinism". He argues that Kurdish is a bi-standard language, therefore it should be treated as such in any successful attempts of its standardization (Hassanpour, سۆرانی "شوڤێنیسمی"). According to his line of argument, since the two major dialects of Kurdish, Sorani and Kurmanji, are so different, to the point that they could be classified as different languages, choosing one standard will definitely misrepresent the whole spectrum of Kurdish language. He suggests that Sorani and Kurmanji need to have different standardized systems providing that vocabulary borrowing between them is facilitated as much as possible. According to his model, different speech varieties must exist in tandem with one written standards for each Kurmanji and Sorani.

As a developing language, the Kurdish language needs a practical policy that facilitates communication cross its dialects and interaction with the modern world, whether for political, educational or commercial purposes. Roshani argues " [o]ne way to achieve this is by promoting all dialects of Kurdish but using a single unified writing system. A strong, workable, feasible and popular one will naturally find its way to become a link for all of them." Wikipedia's platform can be an ideal venue for using such a unified writing system.

As discussed in previous sections, some notable scholars have already expressed their opinion for the use of a unified writing system specifically, Latin-based script. Not it will strengthen Kurdish collective national identity as "written language [is] a precursor to being a

nation" (Sheyholislami, "زۆربەی"); but it will make online communication significantly easier. Moreover, Kurdish is phonemic based language. Thus "[t]he codification by modern phonemic alphabet such as Latin will ease the spelling and learning process as well as widen the flexibility in electronic medium" ("Why do").

As explored in detail in earlier sections, on the one hand, the new media has proven to be remarkably favorable to minority groups such as the Kurds. On the other hand, some of the communication problems that are caused by the orthographic inconsistencies in Kurdish, are more noticeable online and hence, create more visible problems. In addition, fragmented nature of the Kurdish language is rendered even more conspicuous thanks to this new means of communication.

There are various blogs, Facebook Pages and different websites that publish different material in Kurdish and on Kurdish related matters. Among them, there are a number of news agencies, religious groups, politically affiliated websites and independent groups and individuals. Agendas that inspire these websites and material are as diverse as their names and contents. Some pursue certain ideologies and are sponsored by different governments that Kurdistan currently is a part of, others operate to further their own religious or political agenda, etc… .

Accountable, neutral, yet thorough websites are rather rare. Platforms that publish credible material for the sake of knowledge and information dissemination, not because of propensity to an agenda or motive either pro-Kurdish or otherwise, are even more scarce. Although Wikipedia has its own share of criticism, as discussed in detail in previously, it was built on the premiss of NPOV. In other words, users are encouraged to contribute with impartiality and back up their writings with verifiable sources. Such unbiased source of informa-

tion—amid politically colored issues pertinent to the Kurdish question— is really needed especially for those who are not interested in politics but simply in obtaining some information on their desired subjects. Therefore, they are in search of information in Kurdish as a means of functional communication not politically charged symbol of identity. Wikipedia can be a platform that provides information in Kurdish as it is meant to be written for the enemy.

## Conclusion

As Kurds' most prominent identity marker, Kurdish is a highly fragmented language. Such fragmentation is caused both by the intrinsic characteristics of the language and, to a much greater degree, by the sociopolitical and hegemonic influences of those countries that rule over Kurdistan. The multidialectal nature of the language combined with different writing systems makes the language rather unique and its problems more arduous to address. It creates major communication issues among speaker of different dialects and taxes Kurdish collective identity the most. So, the top-to-bottom standardization model has not yielded any result for the Kurdish language. Therefore, in this thesis I have demonstrated that a robust Kurdish Wikipedia could be a viable alternative to the already established hierarchical language planning model. I have demonstrated that Wikipedia's decentralized system provides ordinary citizen an unmatched opportunity to tap into the "collective intelligence" of the wikipedians and participate in the language planning process. Thus, make the Kurdish language current and thriving, create an interlink between different Kurdish dialects and unify the writing systems.The compilation of these efforts will result in facilitating communication online and offline. Although social influence can affect independent decision making in a crowd, crowdsourced standardization of the Kurdish language meets other three criteria of a wise crowd. In other words, the decentralized, diverse and aggregative nature of Wikipedia

should prove that the overall outcome of the process will be a more intelligent, democratic

and effective alternative to the ones that have failed to deliver any result as far as the Kurdish

standardization in concerned.

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