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The Effects of Political and Social Turmoil on LIS Research in the Arab World

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Abstract:

Much of the Arab world has experienced significant political upheaval over the past few years, and government, academic and public libraries across the region have responded to these changes in different ways. Our goal was to investigate how the current circumstances have affected the LIS field, and how LIS practitioners are involved in responding to and documenting these changes.

These questions are only part of a larger investigation that we conducted, in which we examined the main topics and author affiliations of 15,000 articles from 39 top and international LIS journals in English and 769 articles in 7 Arabic-language journals between 2004 and 2013. We looked at the publication patterns of LIS researchers in the Arab world, as well as scholars outside of the Arab world studying the region. We wanted to learn not just about what is being studied, but by whom. In this paper we address the following research questions: What do LIS professors and other practitioners across the Arab world study? Do they collaborate with each other, and with scholars elsewhere in the world? How were research topics affected by the Arab Spring?

Keywords: Arab world, library & information science research, scholarly communications, Arab Spring, systematic review.

Introduction

Although the field of library and information science (LIS) has a long history in the Arab world, the literature about LIS in the region is sparse and has become dated (e.g., Wise and Olden, 1994; Meho and Nsouli, 1999). New research about the field is particularly valuable now, because the region has experienced such political and social upheaval in recent years. Surveying published research can help us understand how the recent uprisings have affected libraries, librarians, and other information professionals in the Arab world. This systematic review of the literature helps to meet a need of English speakers wishing to learn about LIS research in this geographical area. This study also includes journals published in Arabic. Similar studies have been conducted and the results published in Arabic-language journals by scholars in the region (Abdul-Hadi, 2001; Al-Amoodi and Jawhari, 2009). Gdoura (2008) provided a detailed description of LIS research in North Africa, but the geographical scope of his work was limited to Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. As recently as 2012, Al-Aufi and Lor analyzed the intellectual and social organization of LIS in the Arab world by examining Arabic LIS journals, educational institutions, professional societies, and scholarly communication channels. The study presented here has a broader focus both geographically and topically.

The goal of this study was to conduct a systematic review of the LIS literature from the last decade in order to identify research both *about* the Arab world and *conducted by* researchers from the region. To answer our research questions, we needed to identify what issues these scholars are studying, and with whom they are collaborating for their research. In addition, the study was designed to identify the ways that this published research reflects recent political and social changes. Top LIS journals (all English language), internationally focused journals in English, and journals published in the Arab world were all included.

Defining the region, which is sometimes called the Middle East, MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, or the Arab world, can be complicated. For the purposes of this study, all 22 members of the Arab League were included: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen. Although Syria was suspended from the Arab League in 2011, we chose to include it in the systematic review. Appropriate terminology for the political and social change in the region since 2010 is also difficult to determine. Here, we use the phrase “Arab Spring” to refer to the revolutionary events of spring 2011 through today, and “Arab world” as shorthand for the countries in the Arab League.

Some form of Arabic is the dominant language of most of these countries, and Islam is the dominant religion. Despite what they have in common, the countries in the Arab League are spread across two continents and thousands of miles, and encompass a variety of distinct cultures. These countries also vary widely in their political structures and their level of economic development and, naturally, their production of published research.

Significant changes in the intellectual climate have taken place recently across the region, pre-dating the December 2010 events in Tunisia that sparked the Arab Spring. For instance, In a review of core LIS journals between 1980 and 1999, Uzun (2002) found that the number of articles written by authors from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait increased considerably. More recently, according to McCreadie (2013), who in turn cites Adams et al. (2011), “The Arabian, Persian and Turkish Middle East, who produce only four percent of the world's

scientific literature, report growth in the rate of research output that significantly exceeds that seen in Asia and Latin America” (Adams, King and Hook, 2010). Meanwhile, however, “the total annual research output of the African continent is at 27,000 papers per year, equivalent to that of the Netherlands” (McCreadie, 2013).

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

- What topics are LIS researchers in the Arab world studying?
- Do they collaborate with scholars in this region and/or the rest of the world?
- Are LIS researchers outside of the Arab world studying issues in the region?
- Have research patterns been affected by the Arab Spring?

Methods

The systematic review “provides an overview of a particular field or issue by bringing together information from the literature relating to it,” and should include “what question(s) the review was trying to answer; the criteria used to decide which literature to include; how the search for the literature was carried out; the criteria used to judge the quality of the literature; and the outcomes and how they relate to the question(s)” (Harris and White, 2013, n.p.). The goals of this study were determined to be a good fit with the purpose of a systematic review. Kelly and Sugimoto (2013) defined the steps of a systematic review as the following:

1. Identify sources from which studies would be selected.
2. Develop and evaluate inclusion and exclusion criteria to guide the selection of articles from these sources.
3. Validate manual search and selection processes.
4. Develop a coding scheme for analyzing articles.
5. Apply coding scheme to articles (p. 750).

Identify Sources

Three sets of LIS journals were selected for this this study: the top-rated journals, journals with an international focus, and journals published in the Arab world. The initial systematic review only included journals in the top and international journal categories that were published throughout the entire time range, 2004 to 2013. Some of the Arabic-language journals were not published continuously throughout the decade.

In 1985, Kohl and Davis published a study in which directors of Association of Research Library libraries and LIS graduate school deans ranked journals by prestige. In 2004, Nisonger and Davis replicated this study. A list of most prestigious journals was compiled from their results. Some titles were removed because they might be considered trade magazines instead of scholarly journals (e.g., *American Libraries*) or for not being a true periodical (e.g., *Annual Review of Information Science & Technology*, which is an edited volume published once annually). Conference proceedings from the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIST) and the Association for Information

Management (ASLIB) were included, however, because of the timely nature of conference topics. Throughout this paper, these journals will be referred to as the “top” journals.

Unfortunately, no such list exists for internationally-focused or Arabic-language LIS journals. We identified journals in the international category as those having the words “international,” “global” or “world” in the journal title, subtitle or official description which were published from 2004 through 2013. Note that *Libri* appeared on the top-rated list, but was categorized as international as a result of its focus. We will refer to these journals as the “international” journals. We compiled a list of Arabic LIS journals based on knowledge of the LIS field in the Arab world. Once these journals were selected, we solicited feedback from several well-known regional LIS experts in order to finalize the list. These journals will be referred to as the Arabic journals. All journal titles included in this study can be found in the table below.

Table 1 All journal titles included in the systematic review.

	Top Journals	International Journals	Arabic Journals
1	ASIST Proceedings	Chinese Librarianship: An International Electronic Journal	Arab Libraries and Information Journal مجلة المكتبات والمعلومات العربية
2	Aslib Proceedings	Cybermetrics	Cybrarians Journal
3	Collection Management	Focus on International Library and Information Work	Information Studies Journal مجلة دراسات المعلومات
4	College & Research Libraries	IFLA Journal	Journal of King Fahd National Library مجلة مكتبة الملك فهد الوطنية
5	Government Information Quarterly	International Information & Library Review	Journal of the Arab Federation for Libraries and Information مجلة الاتحاد العربي للمكتبات والمعلومات
6	Information & Culture	International Journal of Digital Curation	Maghreb Journal of Documentation and Information لمجلة المغربية للتوثيق والمعلومات
7	Information Processing & Management	International Journal of Information Science and Management	New Trends in Libraries and Information الاتجاهات الحديثة في المكتبات والمعلومات
8	Information Technology & Libraries	International Journal of Knowledge Management	
9	JASIST	International Journal of Legal Information	
10	Journal of Academic Librarianship	International Journal on Digital Libraries	
11	Journal of Documentation	Journal of Library Metadata	
12	Journal of Education for Library & Info. Science	LIBRES	
13	Journal of Information Science	Libri: International Journal of Libraries and Information Services	
14	Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association	New Library World	

15	Journal of the Medical Library Association	New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship
16	Library & Information Science Research	School Libraries Worldwide
17	Library Collecctions, Acquisitions & Tech. Services	
18	Library Quarterly	
19	Library Resources & Technical Services	
20	Library Trends	
21	Reference & User Services Quarterly	
22	Reference Services Review	
23	School Library Research	

Develop Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

We looked at the titles, abstracts, and author affiliations in order to determine whether or not an article was *about* an LIS issue in the Arab world or *written by* an LIS scholar in the region. Because we wanted to find a broader range of contributions to the literature, editorials were included, although book reviews were not. Articles about specific countries in the Arab League or about the region as a whole were included. In order for an article to be considered to be written by an LIS scholar in the region, the author must be affiliated with a university or other institution in the included countries. Authors from the Arab world but affiliated with universities outside of the region were not included, but any author, regardless of citizenship, with a regional affiliation was included.

Validate Manual Search Process

For each journal title selected, every issue published between January 2004 and December 2013 was examined. The use of keyword queries to identify relevant articles was not feasible in the initial review, for two reasons. First, a huge variety of subjects and geographic terms could fall under the umbrella of research about the Arab world or written by scholars in the region. It would be impossible to conduct exhaustive database searches to get an accurate sense of the literature. Second, searching by affiliation is not possible, because there are so many universities in the region and other types of research institutions. To ensure that we conducted a comprehensive search, instead of relying on keyword searching or sampling, we manually examined each article in each issue of each journal between 2004 and 2013.

Develop and Apply Coding Scheme

For each article that met the established criteria, we recorded the author affiliations and country or countries for all authors, not just authors from the Arab world. Articles about countries in the region or the Arab world as a whole but with no regional affiliation were coded as such, and single author articles were noted as well. We were particularly interested in scholarly collaboration, and coded for whether authors worked with others in the same institution, at different institutions in the same country, or with scholars in other parts of the world. Finally, each article was coded with up to four keywords, which were topical and geographical if appropriate. For example, an article called “Developing a Library and

Information Science Bachelor's Degree Program in the United Arab Emirates” was coded with “UAE” and “LIS education.” Often these keywords were taken directly from the author or journal supplied keywords, but sometimes it was necessary to select appropriate keywords. We worked together to ensure keyword agreement, in order to support reliability in the coding process.

Results

We examined 11,954 articles in the top journals, 3,155 in the international journals, and 769 in the Arabic-language journals, appearing in each issue published between January 2004 and December 2013. Almost all of the articles in the 7 Arabic-language journals were related to the Arab world by author affiliation. There were 78 articles in the top journals that were related to the Arab world, either by topic or author affiliation -- only 0.65% of the total number of articles. In the international journals, we identified 91 articles that were related to the Arab world, or 2.89% of the total number of articles. Details about the number of Arab world-related articles can be found in the table and figure below.

Table 2 Number of Arab world-related articles in top and international journals.

	Top Journals	# of Arab World Articles	International Journals	# of Arab World Articles
1	JASIST	17	International Journal of Knowledge Management	16
2	Government Information Quarterly	13	International Information & Library Review	14
3	Journal of Information Science	11	Libri: International Journal of Libraries and Information Services	12
4	Information Processing & Management	9	IFLA Journal	9
5	ASIST Proceedings	8	International Journal of Legal Information	9
6	Aslib Proceedings	7	International Journal of Information Science and Management	8
7	Information & Culture	2	Focus on International Library and Information Work	7
8	Journal of Academic Librarianship	2	New Library World	6
9	Journal of Documentation	2	School Libraries Worldwide	4
10	Library & Information Science Research	2	International Journal on Digital Libraries	2
11	Reference Services Review	2	Chinese Librarianship: An International Electronic Journal	1
12	Journal of Education for Library & Info. Science	1	Journal of Library Metadata	1
13	Library Resources & Technical Services	1	Cybermetrics	0
14	Library Trends	1	International Journal of Digital Curation	0
15	Collection Management	0	LIBRES	0
16	College & Research Libraries	0	New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship	0

17	Information Technology & Libraries	0
18	Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association	0
19	Journal of the Medical Library Association	0
20	Library Collections, Acquisitions & Tech. Services	0
21	Library Quarterly	0
22	Reference & User Services Quarterly	0
23	School Library Research	0
	TOTAL	

Figure 1 Number of Arab world-related articles by year.



Author Affiliation & Collaboration

Of the 78 top journal articles, 32 (41%) of these articles were written by authors with no regional affiliation. For example, several articles were published about the fate of libraries and archives during the Iraq war, but the authors were generally affiliated with universities in the United States. Authors from the Arab world represented 36 different universities and libraries in the region, from the National School of Computer Science in Tunisia to Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Of the 91 Arab world-related articles in the international journals, only 25 (27%) of authors were not affiliated with an institution in the region. Combining the articles from both top and international journals, the top five countries of affiliation were Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. Authors from 15 of the 22 Arab League countries (plus Syria) were represented. There were no articles by authors from Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, Somalia, Syria, although there was research *about* some of these countries.

In the Arabic literature, only 3 of the 769 articles were written by an author affiliated with a university outside of the Arab world; these authors were from Norway, Germany and Nigeria. The top countries for author affiliation were Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Tunisia and Jordan.

Figure 2 English-language journal author country affiliations.

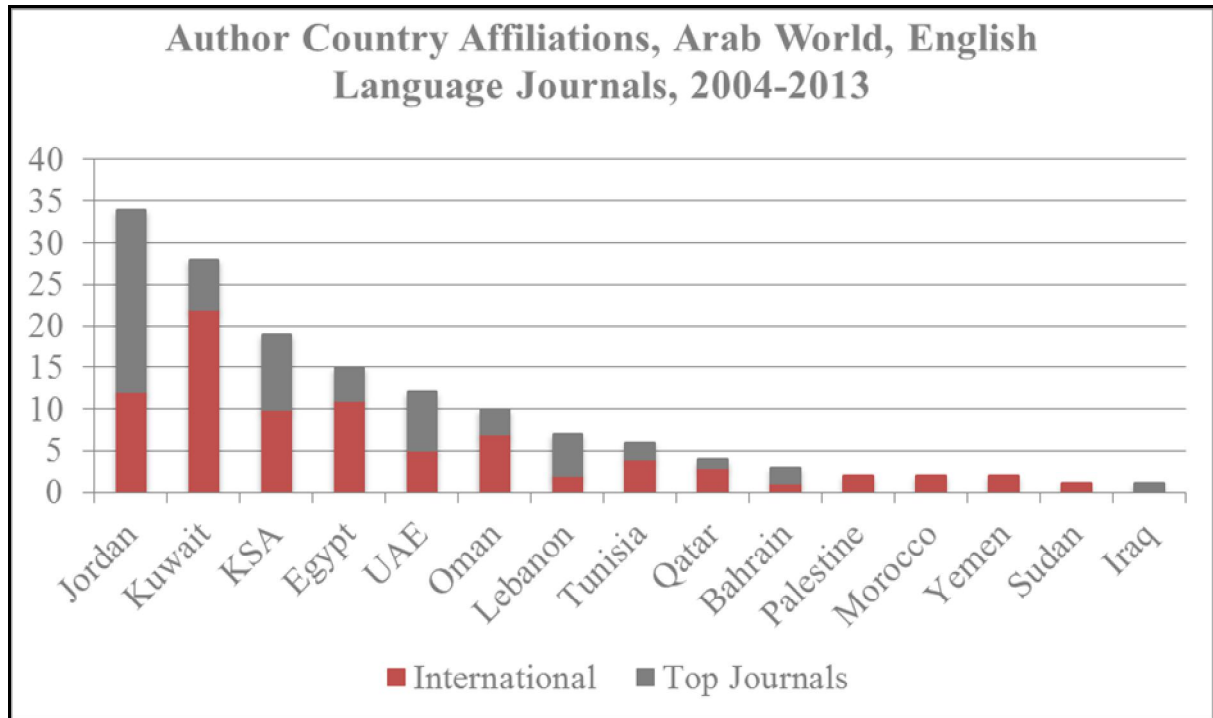
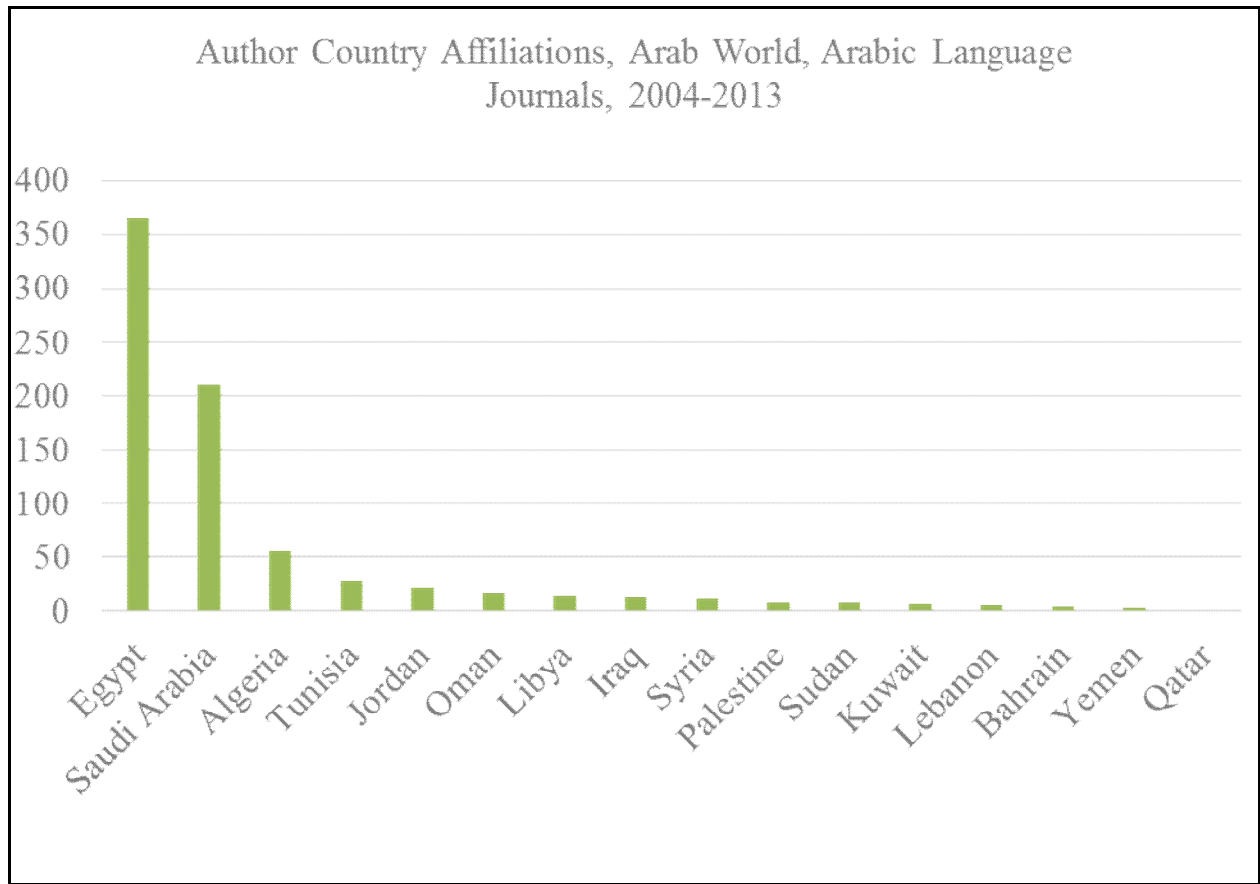


Figure 3 Arabic-language journal author country affiliations.



Scholarly collaboration was common in the top and international journals. 36% of the top journal authors collaborated with a co-author in their own institution, often from the same department but sometimes from another department in the same university. 21% of the international journal authors worked with co-authors from the same institution. 13% of the top journal articles and 9% of the international journal articles showed in-country collaboration. Often authors worked with scholars from other universities, and occasionally with co-authors from corporations or government agencies. In the international journals, collaboration with a co-author from a non-Arab country was the most common – 24% of the articles. In the top journals, 29% worked with a co-author from outside the region. The most common non-Arab world countries for collaboration were the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and France. However, the vast majority of articles in the Arabic journals were single author works. Only 10% of these articles demonstrated research collaboration by crediting more than one author.

Research Topics

For the top journals, the most common research topics were information retrieval, Arabic language, and e-government. This group of articles did not have many clear themes; research topics tended to be widely varied. Research themes were more obvious in international journal articles, in part because this set of journals included titles devoted to specific subfields of library and information studies. For example, there were many articles about knowledge management, school libraries, and law librarianship due to the inclusion of journals such as the *International Journal of Knowledge Management*, *School Libraries Worldwide*, and *The International Journal of Legal Information*. Other common topics in the

international journals included information behavior, and the LIS field and LIS education. Both the top and international journals included articles about the effects of war on Iraqi libraries and archives. Some research was focused on libraries or populations in specific countries, most commonly Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait. Table 3 shows the number of articles that demonstrated a research focus on specific countries or regions in the Arab world. The most common topics in the Arabic-language journals were cataloging, digital libraries and repositories, LIS education, open access, and the internet.

Table 3 Research by geographical location.

Geographical Research	Top Journals	International Journals	Total
Kuwait	4	15	19
Arab World/MENA/North Africa/Middle East	3	12	15
Iraq	4	9	13
Egypt	5	8	13
Jordan	3	7	10
Saudi Arabia	3	4	7
Lebanon	3	1	4
Somalia	3	1	4
UAE	2	2	4
Oman	-	4	4
Sudan	1	2	3
Palestine	1	2	3
Arabian Gulf	-	2	2
Morocco	1	-	1
Libya	1	-	1
Tunisia	1	-	1
Syria	-	1	1
Qatar	-	1	1
Yemen	-	1	1

We expected to find scholars publishing research related to the Arab Spring and the political and social change in the region. However, there was little published on this topic in the journals that we reviewed. This is discussed further in the following section. The most common research topics in the top and international journals can be found in Table 4.

Table 4 Most common research topics.

Research Topics	Top Journals	International Journals	Total
Information retrieval	22	5	27
Arabic	22	2	24
Knowledge management	-	16	16
E-government	12	3	15
LIS field and education	4	10	14
Information seeking	6	7	13

Library services (reference, instruction, etc.)	5	7	12
War in Iraq	3	8	11
Legal information	-	9	9
Scholarly communications	3	3	6
School librarianship	-	5	5

Discussion

Language

Because libraries, LIS departments, and researchers in the Arab world tend to use Arabic as the primary language for teaching and research, it may be that scholars in the region do not prioritize publishing their research in English or other foreign language journals (Al-Aufi and Lor, 2012). Certainly we expected to find more research by and about LIS in the Arab world published in Arabic than in English. Recent research suggests this is true; Zakaria (2014), for instance, conducted a similar study with 8 peer-reviewed LIS journals in Arabic and found a number of articles by Algerian scholars, while we found none in the top and international journals. But 56 of the 769 Arab world journal articles were written by authors affiliated with an institution in Algeria. In addition, it may be that some authors in the Arab world prefer to publish in other languages such as French. Some parts of the region have close collaborative ties with France and still use French as a language of instruction and discourse.

Arab Spring

We found very little original research about the Arab Spring and LIS in the 46 journals we surveyed. Only two articles in the top journals addressed the Arab Spring or its constituent uprisings since 2010 in significant ways. One is Abdelhay's "The Arab Uprising 2011: New Media in the Hands of a New Generation in North Africa," though it was published as a conference paper in the *ASLIB Proceedings*. Abdelhay is one of many commentators across the disciplines to note the remarkable power of social media in mass political action. "Social media in Egyptian government websites: Presence, usage, and effectiveness," by Abdelsalam, Reddick, Gamal, and Al-shaar, (2013), is another, published in *Government Information Quarterly*. It shows a significant increase in the social media activities on government websites following the January 25th Revolution in Egypt, with many of the posts dedicated to announcing changes in government personnel as a direct consequence of the uprising.

Of articles in the international journals, one article, Rizk and Kamel's (2013) "ICT and building a knowledge-based society in Egypt" does devote a section to the use of social media during the January 25th Revolution and the subsequent usage of it by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. There were some reviews of books about the Arab Spring in top journals and international journals, but we did not include book reviews in this stage of our research. Surprisingly, none of the research published in the Arabic-language LIS journals was related to the Arab Spring.

For a glimpse of what we might be missing, we conducted test searches in three major LIS databases: Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), Library Literature & Information Science, and Library, Information Science, & Technology Abstracts (LISTA). Searching the default fields for "Arab Spring" returned 11, 43, and 80 results, respectively. 33 of the 43 from Library Literature & Information Science were book reviews, as were 50 of the 80 from LISTA. The number of book reviews related to the Arab Spring demonstrates

that other disciplines, such as political science and sociology, were quick to publish on this topic.

Using “Arab Spring” and other search queries, such as “Arab uprising,” “Arab revolution” and “Egyptian revolution,” we identified 25 unique articles on this topic. Six of them were published in 2014, and thus outside the scope of our study. All of them (except one from 2014 in a top journal) were published in journals not included in this study, such as *Microform & Digitization Review* and *Library Review*. In addition, many of the articles about the Arab Spring that appeared in the search results were published in journals that are not core to the LIS field, like the *Journal of Communication* or *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*.

As we write this, Egyptians are in the process of electing Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to be their next President, which is only one of many significant political changes to occur in Egypt since early 2011. In academic inquiry, it is inevitable that research about major political and social upheaval will appear in a variety of formats over a number of years, and the Arab Spring and its effect on LIS research in the Arab world is no exception.

The 2003 Iraq War and other political topics

The 2003 American-led war in Iraq is another example of this. Of the 169 articles we found in the top and international journals, 8 of them were related to the severe damage sustained by Iraq’s National Library and Archive in Baghdad in 2003, or hardships in the LIS field as a result of the war. These articles began appearing in journals we reviewed by 2004, but continued for the next four years, and certainly longer in other publications:

- “Culture and the New Iraq: The Iraq National Library and Archive, ‘Imagined community,’ and the Future of the Iraqi Nation,” from *Libraries & the Cultural Record* (2008).
- “The destruction of a cultural heritage: With reference to the problems of Iraq,” from *New Library World* (2007).

Other articles illustrate other political topics that we encountered in this study:

- “Balancing the protection of civil liberties during wartime: How the Israeli Supreme Court shaped Palestinian freedom of expression during the Second Intifada,” from *Government Information Quarterly* (2005).
- “The rights of Muslim women in the Middle East: a pathfinder,” from the *International Journal of Legal Information* (2009).
- “Legislation for library and information services in French-speaking Africa revisited,” from *International Information & Library Review* (2004).

Future Research

The next step in this research project will be to expand the journal titles in the study to include more international journals. Broadening the list of journal titles will provide a clearer picture of both what, where, and with whom Arab authors are publishing, and what types of research authors elsewhere in the world are conducting about this region.

We will also include the issues of all included journals published in 2014. The political and social turmoil in the region remains an evolving issue, and it can take months or even years to

see a paper published in a scholarly journal. It may be that we are just not far enough removed chronologically to see a significant presence of research related to the Arab Spring in the LIS literature.

For future research, it could also be valuable to include additional scholarly communications, such as book reviews, letters, conference proceedings, newsletters, and white papers. A systematic review of European publications, including languages beyond English and Arabic might yield interesting results. For example, Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian and other authors may be more likely to publish in French.

Conclusion

This paper represents only the beginning of what will be an exhaustive systematic review of the LIS literature between 2004 and 2014. Our findings indicate that LIS researchers in the Arab world are rarely published in the top and international LIS journals, but that they are studying a wide variety of topics regardless. These authors publish extensively in the Arabic-language LIS journals published in the region. Authors publishing in Arabic-language journals do not generally collaborate with other scholars. However, working with colleagues within the same institution or country, or in non-Arab countries is more common for authors publishing in the top or international journals. Common topics identified in the systematic review of the literature included information retrieval, Arabic, LIS education, information behavior, cataloging, digital libraries and repositories, and open access. The Arab Spring and its effects on LIS in the region was rarely a research topic in the LIS literature. Further research will expand the study to include more internationally-focused journals, and titles in additional languages.

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