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Conference Paper

News Sites and Fake News in the Egyptian Political Transformation 2013-14: Aljazeera.net Case Study

Hatem Alsridi[1], Mokhtar Elareshi[2], and Abdul-Karim Ziani[3]

[1]Mass communication, Tourism and Arts Department, Bahrain University, Bahrain
[2]Department of Media and Communication, Tripoli University, Tripoli, Libya
[3]Mass communication, Tourism and Arts Department, Bahrain University, Bahrain

Corresponding Author:
Abdul-Karim Ziani
aziani@uob.edu.bh

Abstract

Online activities allow users to benefit from, and engage with, news and information in a more complex way than was possible with old news settings. However, many have expressed concerns about the effects of false news stories, or 'fake news', circulated largely via online services on public view. This study examines the news sites' behaviour and the attitudes of elite Egyptian academics towards information provided by the *aljazeera.net* news site during the Egyptian political conflict and the transformation from former President Mohamed Morsi to current President Abdul Fatah el-Sisi. A total of 450 elite academics were surveyed online to evaluate news and information about the political conflict and the transformation in Egypt through focusing on how they became informed about such news, their perceptions of news via the *aljazeera.net* site and their evaluation of whether the network has misused information regarding this period. The results indicated that the *aljazeera.net* site used different, false and 'fake news' techniques mainly in support of the pro-Morsi position during the transition to el-Sisi. Respondents indicated that misinformation was clearly provided by *aljazeera.net* in different formats, though some highlighted the importance of accessing news from online sources. Respondents indicated that online content can be easily spread among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking or editorial judgment. This raises questions about who becomes the arbiter of truth.

Keywords: Fake News, Misinformation News, Online News Sites, *aljazeera.net*, Mohamed Morsi, Abdul Fatah el-Sisi, News Propaganda, Social Networking Sites, Online Audiences

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1. Background

The early months of 2013 witnessed large protests against Mohamed Morsi, the fifth President of Egypt (from 30 June 2012 to 3 July 2013) over alleged decisions that the Egyptians considered to support *Brotherhoodism* over other political forces, as well as other decisions alleged to threaten Egyptian national security (Rashdan, 2015). There were also sectarian incidents in Abbasia, Achim and Aswan and clashes in Port Said because of judgments against those involved in the "massacre" of Port Said Stadium, which forced Morsi to impose a state of emergency and a curfew in the canal cities area (Abaza, 2013). In April 2013, a movement called "Tamarod" ("Rebellion" in Arabic) launched a major campaign to obtain Egyptian signatures calling for the resignation of President Morsi and for early presidential elections. By June 29, 22,134,465 signatures had been collected calling for the end of the Morsi regime and a mass protest was called to confirm the signatures (Monier and Ranko, 2013). As a result, the Defense Minister, Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, announced on July 3 that the Egyptian Army had ousted Morsi, that early presidential elections would be held and that a roadmap had been established to complete the country's constitutional institutions. In January 2014, the new Egyptian constitution was adopted after the Supreme Elections Commission announced the final result of the referendum and el-Sisi was elected (Kingsley, 2014; Sanyal, 2015).

The June 30 Revolution is seen as a distinctly popular event that expressed the wishes of the vast majority of Egyptians and it is now described as "online democracy" which enabled the Egyptians to participate politically and to advocate the January 25 Revolution in a way that did not involve the state media (Monier and Ranko, 2013; Rashdan, 2015). The online platforms have enabled people to express their views openly. Following the 2013 Egyptian election, a specific concern arose related to the effect of false stories or "fake news" circulated on news sites and the way in which news is spread and widely shared on these platforms. Statistically, evidence has shown that Egyptians are now addicted to online sites which are most popular among those aged 18-24, followed by those aged 25-34, with more males (64%) than females (36%), for example, using Facebook on a daily basis (Cairoscene, 2014). Likewise, more online activities now take place involving different segments of society. It is argued that aljazeera.net became heavily involved in the period of political transformation through giving much support to Morsi's party, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), over others. This is because aljazeera.net has its own agenda in dealing with such issues

and this raises concerns over the ethical issues arising from media organisations providing accurate news and information. The network *deliberately* attempted to create confusion and instability in Egypt by feeding hate and division between locals. This study aims to examine the behaviour of elite Egyptian academics regarding information provided by the aljazeera.net site during the political conflict and the process of transformation between former President Mohamed Morsi and current President Abdul Fatah el-Sisi. It examines respondents' perceptions of the network's news and information during this period in order to understand online audiences' perceptions of misused information and "fake news" concerning Egypt.

2. Related Work

Misinformation, or "fake news", is not a new phenomenon in modern society in terms of threatening democracy and freedom (Zhou, Wellman and Yu, 2011; EBU, 2018). For example, the term was highlighted by news media in coverage of Donald Trump's election in 2016 (Silverman and Singer-Vine, 2016; Titcomb and Carson, 2018) and the UK's Brexit vote in June 2016 (Briant, 2018) with concerns about the credibility of online content being raised, especially after widespread reports of social sites sharing false stories and allegations that "someone" paid them to do this (Wojdynski, 2016). "Fake news" is not entirely a new phenomenon – in fact, "fake news", or lies, biased news and propaganda, has been known for more than a century (Chomsky, 1991). Such phenomena appeared in the late 19th century, but were not rapidly spread – as a result, their corrosive effect on electoral politics and democratic processes was not great due to the lack of digital means of distribution (Wardle, 2017; Briant, 2018).

In Arab regions, "fake news" has also found its way into mainstream media, largely through their journalists' over-reliance on online sources or through lack of information about an event, especially in wartime and during conflicts. For example, some well-known mainstream media, such as Al-Jazeera TV and Al-Arabiya TV, have recently produced false information through *deliberately* made-up news stories to divert the public for various reasons, especially during and after the 2011 Arab uprisings (Buccianti and el-Richani, 2015). In his book, *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann states that we inhabit a cave of media misrepresentations and distortions of reality. As a result, neither press nor public can discern the truth. Nigel Oakes said that "truth is for those who don't have 'the balls' to lie in order to win – citizens are reduced to levers and tools, and value is placed only in fetishizing the levers of power" (as cited in Briant, 2018). Indeed, Winston Churchill said that "in wartime, truth is so precious that she

should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies" and, in the US, the George W Bush aide, Ron Suskind (2004) wrote that "we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality".

2.1. Types of "fake news"

To understand the current information ecosystem, three elements can be broken down regarding misinformation or "fake news" and how these are spread via online platforms, as Wardle (2017) highlights: (1) the types of content being created/shared; (2) the motivations behind such creation/sharing; and (3) how the content is disseminated. Baym (2005: 261) adds that "fake news necessitates assumptions about some kind of *authentic* or *legitimate* set of news practices". This means that, when users believe that a news site is journalistic in nature, they can be exploited and persuaded to believe untrue things (e.g., the aljazeera.net site). Wardle (2017) further argues that, when considering whether information is false, there are seven distinct types of problematic content and we should think about these when viewing media content (see e.g., Silverman and Singer-Vine, 2016). These are: (1) satire or parody where there is no intention to cause harm, but there is potential for people to be fooled; (2) misleading content used to frame an issue or an individual; (3) imposter content when genuine sources are impersonated; (4) fabricated content where new content is 100% false and designed to deceive and do harm; (5) false connections when headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content; (6) false context when genuine content is shared with false contextual information; and (7) manipulated content when genuine information or imagery is manipulated in order to deceive.

Furthermore, the internet has hugely contributed to the proliferation of new forms of partisan media (e.g., websites, blogs, tweets, posts) and, with the emergence and popularity of social media sites, news partisanship has become more popular than ever (Vargo, Guo and Amazeen, 2018). In some Arab countries, some politicians/religious leaders, via their partisan media, have used false information alongside state media to manipulate public opinion. For example, the Qatari authorities showed great support for the MB party in Egypt due to its ideological views and allowed MB members to use the channel as a platform with which to divert Egyptians. As a result, its one-sided coverage and alleged bias has badly affected the channel's reputation (Williams, 2014). To show its support for the MB party, the channel, for example, fully allowed Yousf al-Qaradawi, a pro-MB preacher, to post his views (Smoltczyk, 2011).

Some believe that Qatar's Al-Jazeera has played a provocative role with the aim of overthrowing a number of Arab regimes, implementing creative chaos, dividing the Arab region by spreading sedition and instigating unrest in Arab countries. We argue that aljazeera.net sets the agenda of other media outlets, newspapers, television and radio due to its long-standing media coverage around the world. We consider that aljazeera.net was able to construct the Egyptians' perceived importance of interconnections between issues regarding Musi or el-Sisi. However, the channel effectively became a supporter of violent groups and this affected its media credibility in a large number of Arab regions (e.g., Egypt). In fact, the channel possesses the potential, in terms of material and technology, to enable it to falsify public awareness and fall into lies and deception. The channel promotes the claims of division, e.g. in Iraq, Syria and Libya. It uses its site to attack others, especially when its offices are closed, such as in Syria and Egypt. It uses its own "electronic militias" to support its allied groups (e.g., in Syria, Libya and Yemen). The channel clearly led the assault on the Egyptian army, as confirmed by leaked documents during the January 25 Revolution where it played a confirmed role in destroying Egypt by igniting the flames of sedition among Egyptians and through its bias towards the MB party. These matters are of great concern in the Arab world. This study is underpinned by the following questions: (**RQ1**) How have elite Egyptian academics adapted/perceived the more diverse provision of news information from aljazeera.net? (**RQ2**) Have they become more aware of misinformation or false news from specific news services? The study reported in this paper has provided an up-to-date analysis of online content provided by aljazeera.net, and used by elite Egyptian academics, in an attempt to map out the way in which news and information in the region is being perceived.

3. Method

3.1. Respondents

Data were collected from 450 elite Egyptian academics who are specialists in media and communication studies and who teach in public/private Egyptian universities. These were: Faculty of Mass Communication, Cairo University (public), Faculty of Information, University of Beni Suef (public), Mass Media and Communication Technology Faculty, South Valley University (public), Media Studies Faculty, American University in Cairo (private), Media Studies Department, German University in Cairo (private), Faculty of Media and Mass Communication, October 6 University (private), Faculty

of Media and Arts, Pharos University in Alexandria (private), Faculty of Media and Communication Technology, University of Misr for Science and Technology (private) and Media Department, Canadian University (private). Out of 450 responses, 32 were dropped for not completing the questionnaire, leaving the study with 418 respondents (as shown in Table 1 below).

TABLE 1: The sample characteristics.

Gender	N	0%
Male	309	73.9
Female	109	26.1
Age		
26-35	79	18.9
36-45	144	34.4
46-55	100	23.9
56-65	68	16.3
> 66	27	6.5
Education level		
Professor	90	21.6
Asso. Professor	127	30.5
Ass. Professor	114	27.3
Lecturer	66	15.8
Ass. Lecturer	21	5.0
Specialised		
Journalism	86	20.6
PR and Ads	120	28.8
TV & Radio	115	27.5
New Media	97	23.0
Residence		
Urban	296	70.8
Rural	122	29.2

3.2. Procedures

Data were gathered through an online survey, googlesurvey.com, with a questionnaire containing a total of 13 questions. Before proceeding, it is necessary to bear in mind that, because the data were gathered via an online survey, the generalising and the findings are limited to those participants who voluntarily undertook the questionnaire. The questionnaire was simply designed with questions measured on closed options. The validity of the instrument was tested by reviewing the questions to ensure that the words/phrases were linguistically clear.

4. Findings

4.1. Views on news content

Respondents were generally asked about their opinion regarding news and information content on the aljazeera.net site and whether they thought that the network posted any misinformation about Egypt during the aforementioned period. The majority of respondents (62.7%) believed that the network often posted misinformation about Egypt, while 30.9% said that they "don't know" or "don't think so" (6.4%). This is an indication that our respondents were aware of "fake news", or fabricated news content, posted about their country.

Respondents were also asked, more specifically, about the aljazeera.net news site's coverage of events and issues in Egypt from June 2013 to July 2014. A total of 34.3% of respondents believed that aljazeera.net "betrayed" or manipulated the public with news and information when covering the events. Some (27%) felt "very betrayed", while 13.6% of respondents believed that the coverage was "very objective" or "just objective" (9.5%) in posting news and information about Egypt during this period, with 15.5% of respondents stating that they "don't know".

Those who believed that aljazeera.net posted "fake news" during this period were asked how the network posted this news and information. The respondents considered that the network was able to post "fake news" via the following: pictures (89.1%), videos (82.2%), news sources (79.6%), links (49.5%), news stories (42.5%) and news context (36%). Respondents also added that the network commented via news events (38%), via social media sites (15.6%) and through selected speakers (14.4%). When respondents were asked about the scope used by aljazeera.net to post "fake news", 60% said that the network covered security and military news topics, 58.9% said political news, 39% said sports news, 26.3% said economic news, 24.4% said cultural news and 20.6% said social news. This shows that the network used a large variety of means of spreading "fake news" or misinformation. It seems that the network broadcasted/posted false news which was believed to harm national security, causing the network to be subject to persecution, as Rashdan (2015) indicates.

4.2. Reasons behind misinformation news

To determine whether Egyptians were aware of the reasons behind the posting of misinformation news, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with six

generally reasoned items associated with posting "fake news" about Egypt on a five-point scale (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree).

TABLE 2: Different reasons for posting "fake news" (n = 417).

The network posted misinformation ...	SA	DK	SD
to support the MB party	66.9	8.2	25.0
to cause the el-Sisis election campaign to fail	64.7	9.4	25.9
to distort the Egyptian internal image	62.9	11.5	25.6
to distort the Egyptian external image	62.8	11.5	25.7
because of the network's policy of distorting and counterfeiting news	61.9	11.3	26.9
because its nature to post misinformation news	60.9	12.2	26.9

The findings show that most respondents were in agreement about the network posting "fake news" about Egypt. For example, the majority (saying "agree strongly" or "agree") of respondents said that they believed that the channel posted "fake news" for the following reasons: to support the MB (66.9%); to cause the el-Sisi election campaign to fail (64.7%); to distort Egypt's external image (62.9%) or internal image (62.9%); it is the nature of the network to post "fake news" about Egypt (61.9%); the network has a policy of distorting and counterfeiting news (60.9%).

Figure 1: Most words/phases mentioned regarding misinformation news about Egypt.

Finally, respondents were asked to write three words/phrases that came into their minds when talking about "fake news" about Egypt (Figure 1). Most of the words/phrases mentioned by the respondents were: "army/military" (40%), followed by "coup/legitimacy" (16.7%), "President Morsi" and "the legitimate president"

(15.8%) and "the police, security and intelligence" (13.5%). Less frequently used words were: "el-Sisi" (8%), "Egyptian media" (5.8%), "poverty" (4.7%) and "religious institutions/al-azhar" or "Church" (3.2%). Al-Jazeera here seems to focus on the media elite in its misinformation news about the sovereign institutions in Egypt such as the army, security, the elected president (el-Sisi) and other media and religious institutions.

5. Discussion

In response to **RQ1**, an online survey of elite Egyptian academics, which investigated news sites and fake news information in the Egyptian political transformation of 2013-14, provided evidence that news information content provided by some news sites, such as aljazeera.net, was described as false and as misinformation. There is no doubt that the internet, via news sites, has been widely patronised by Arabs and it is clear that widespread use of such news sites to access news and information stories about Egypt has allowed such news stories to be disseminated quickly, with reports that the majority of Egyptians get news and information via different platforms such as aljazeera.net (Dennis, Martin and Wood, 2016). Respondents also indicated that the network somehow "betrayed", or attempted to manipulate, the public about the political situation.

Focusing on news information delivered by aljazeera.net, the study found that the network superseded indigenous local and national Egyptian media services by creating and taking part in producing news and information about the political situation in Egypt during this period and supporting the MB party **(RQ2)**. In doing so, the network used different materials to post false news about Egypt, such as pictures, video clips, news sources, news links and news stories, with the specific intention of competing with the local media. However, the local authorises were able to control the flow of information and refuted information about Egypt posted by aljazeera.net. The network also used a wide scope to post misinformation news about Egypt. For example, it used security and military news topics, political news, sports news and economic news. Such news and information posted on the network was seen as a threat and as harmful to national security, which caused the network to be shut down (Rashdan, 2015).

The reasons for aljazeera.net posting misinformation about Egypt in the same period are clear. As indicated by the respondents, support for the MB party, the desire for the el-Sisis campaign to fail and the desire to alter Egypt's internal/external image were the most cited rationales behind misinformation news. This indicates that the Egyptian

elites were fully aware of the types of news and information posted by the network. Three factors could be at play. First, the views of the network and its news content were easily identified as misinformation and false news. Second, the manipulated content lacked strong supporting evidence. Third, the Egyptian elites were fully aware of the media fabrication and of how news could be produced to divert and influence audiences.

Several words/phrases were mentioned by the respondents regarding misinformation news posted by the network covering the news and information about Egypt. The words/phrases most used were "army/military", followed by using "coup/legitimacy" and words mentioning President Morsi as being the legitimate president. This can be seen as interference in the local affairs of Egypt and as an outrage by the new government of el-Sisi.

6. Conclusion

Since late 2010, news sites have been seen as important tools in mobilising and organising Egyptian users throughout the uprising (Dennis, Martin and Wood, 2016, 2017). Their impact suggests that those concerned with the quest for democracy and peace should pay more attention to the explicit and implicit effects of these social media (Zhou, Wellman and Yu, 2011). "Fake news" is seen as stories that are generally false or fabricated. However, such news became very popular at certain times e.g., during elections and wars. "Fake news" is the most visible element in the online information disorder in which e.g., some social media have huge influence on users' access to information (EBU, 2018). News stories range from hoaxes and propaganda to disinformation purporting to be real news, which now frequently circulate more on new media (social media) to drive web traffic and amplify their effect. Some stories are seen as completely false and created for financial, religious and political gains (Wardle, 2017). News and current affairs are central to public-service media and are seen as an essential element in informing the public and helping them to understand the world around them. This means offering a wide choice of quality news and information, impartial information and pluralistic views.

With the emergence and popularity of accessing news and information via the internet, news sites' coverage became more popular among Egyptians than it had ever been before (Vargo, Guo and Amazeen, 2018). However, the internet, via news sites, facilitates the spread of misinformation which targets users already engaged in conversation on a particular issue (e.g., the ousting of Morsi). This study has shown that

participants indicated that aljazeera.net posted false news in a professional manner to support the Morsi campaign against el-Sisi during 2013 and 2014. The importance of these findings is that the participants were able to identify the concept of "fake news" or misinformation news when they referred to the content that is fabricated for political direction and intention or for ideological views. They were also aware of the widespread use of news and information via the internet and networking sites and of the ability of users to get access to a huge quantity of information without gatekeepers or filters. This means that users have to fast-check and find true information for themselves and trust those news sources that they perceive to be credible, as Flanagin and Metzger (2000) indicate.

Despite the recent hostility and disagreement between Al-Jazeera and the Egyptian authorities, the network has been working intensively on different Egyptian matters and has tried to interfere with the public and influence them on every aspect of Egyptian life and current affairs. Regarding the period analysed here, the study found that the relationship between Egypt and Al-Jazeera has become a negative one. The network lost its main office in Cairo due to allegations of producing and trying to manipulate Egyptians about what is going on in their country. The lack of objective news and use of political propaganda affected the network's reputation among local people. This could help the local media to fill the gap and to replace the news and information coming from aljazeera.net. In fact, it seems that the Egyptian media were strong enough to refute aljazeera.net's news and information, especially during this period.

To sum up, although this paper has provided a more recent analysis of online content provided by aljazeera.net, its findings should be considered in light of its limitations. For example, the study was conducted at a time when there was popular discussion in Egypt about misinformation news and false news and this could have influenced the outcome. The raising of the "fake news" issue in Egypt regarding the political transformation could have affected public debate and the subsequent survey findings. Second, participants (in the survey and interviews) could have misremembered or tailored their responses in a way that would paint them in a favourable light. This paper identified news and information provided only by aljazeera.net to determine how news and information was being perceived by Egyptian elites only. Future work could explore more in terms of both news sites and population.

7. Authors' Bio

Hatem Alsridi is an assistant professor in the Department of Media, Tourism and Arts at Bahrain University, Bahrain. His research interests include news media, Arab satellite TV channels, social media use. E: halsridi@uob.edu.bh.

Mokhtar Elareshi is an assistant professor in Media and Communication Studies and also a Former Head of Media Department at Azzaytuna University 2003–2006. He is the author of News Consumption in Libya (Cambridge Scholar, 2013), the co-author of The Future of News Media in the Arab World (LAMBERT, 2013) and the co-editor of Social Media in the Arab World (I.B Tauris, 2016). His research interests include news consumption, young adults' media habits, new media, mobile phone use, political communication, and satellite TV. E: arishimok@yahoo.com

Abdul-Karim Ziani is an associate professor in the Department of Media, Tourism and Arts at Bahrain University, Bahrain. He is the author of Conflict of wills: Gaddafi's image in the Washington Post newspaper in the era of President Reagan (Talta Publishing House, 2007) and American press: Developing philosophy and treatment (Talta Publishing House, 2005). Among his special areas of interest are international political communication, new media and politics and news coverage. E: aziani@uob.edu.bh

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