



*Introduction*

**Decoding the Echo Chamber:  
The Proliferation and Impact of Fake News  
in Arab Media Post-Arab Spring**

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In our information-driven society, individuals increasingly consume news instantly via online platforms, including news websites, social media, blogs, and forums. In particular, social media platforms have become fertile ground for the proliferation of fake news, where false information is produced and widely disseminated, often from untraceable IP addresses (Shae and Tsai 2019). These platforms serve as near-perfect conduits for spreading news to a vast audience, given their ability to attract followers. Consequently, the emergence of viral content or 'hotspots' has facilitated the rampant spread of fake news in cyberspace (Dice 2017; Shae and Tsai 2019).

This trend has significant implications for global media industries. News editors who receive information via social media often have limited capacity to verify its authenticity, as they might with traditional sources. The task of distinguishing real news from fake becomes increasingly intricate and demanding in the highly competitive media landscape. Various media platforms have started to select and publish posts, comments, and articles from an array of sources without sufficient verification (Wilding and Fray 2018). As a result, assessing the credibility of information has become immensely challenging due to the sheer volume of news, the fragmentation of sources, and the prevalence of biased social cues.

Nearly a quarter-century after the inception of the internet and online news, the journalistic community finds itself revisiting fundamental questions about truth and falsity on the web. Can we trust online sources? How do we detect fake news? How do we combat the spread of misinformation and hoaxes? Citizens have a right to receive high-quality, accurate information, and it falls to the media to uphold this standard. Thus, the primary tasks in the modern newsroom now include identifying credible sources, evaluating news resources, and compiling reliable databases.

Turning to the Arab region, fake news is not a new concept in Arab media. The concept has been present before the advent of social media and the internet, often intertwined with new deliberate disinformation campaigns,

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and propaganda news typically orchestrated by some Arab governments or influential businesses (Alandete 2019; El Gody 2021; Kozman 2021).

The term "fake news" gained popularity in the Arab world following the mass demonstrations in 2010 that eventually led to the Arab Spring. This period served as fertile ground for the dominance of fake news and dis/misinformation, where a mix of news, rumors, facts, and fiction became prevalent (O'Donnell citing Howard 2011). Fake news found a stagnant public sphere, favorable for rapid development in the Arab world following the revolutions. Several political sects started to disseminate false information, accusations, and rumors to control public opinion. For example, in order to control Tahrir Square, the main gathering place for Egyptian revolutionaries/protesters, dissidents—old and new—created rumors and disseminated them on social media and TV channels to influence the masses. A post-truth environment started to develop where rhetoric appealing to sentiments reigned and, where facts and truth became trivial. In such contexts, these sentiments and opinions tend to be quickly picked up by social media activists and the rumors are soon seen as 'true facts' (Josua and Edel 2021).

Post-revolution political actors started to create satellite channels and social media pages to amplify their discussions, attract communities, and enable these communities to interact with each other (El Gody 2016). On the other hand, clashes between Arab governments and online dissidents intensified as online discussions played a critical role in deepening sectarianism in Arab societies. The media rumble between the different sects gave Arab governments the ultimate opportunity to control media discussions, claiming that new media deviated from being a tool of democracy to one that could fragment society. Even though the media landscape in the Arab world has changed dramatically since the end of the twentieth century; characterized initially by the emergence of satellite TV channels followed by the penetration of the internet and social media, there is still a disjunction between the promises carried by these technological developments after the revolutions and the realities of Arab politics (Amin 2010; Ayish 2018). In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, political actors across the Arab region began to establish satellite channels and social media pages to amplify their discussions, engage communities, and foster interaction among them (El Gody 2021). Concurrently, conflicts between Arab governments and online dissidents escalated, as online conversations significantly contributed to widening sectarian divisions within Arab societies especially in Sudan, Jordan, and Egypt. Arab governments have started to move from the viewer side of technologies to the producer side. Understanding the threat of a new wave of democratization, several governments have started to utilize new media technologies to defragment pro-democracy voices. Similarly, several governments have started to impose restrictions on service providers; others



have started to impose tighter measures on infrastructure, with laws and regulations that tighten control over the media landscape; surveillance has become a common practice in almost all Arab systems (Josua and Edel 2021).

Few studies (cf. Nagoudi et al. 2020; Bouchikh 2021; Webb and Emam 2021, Fouad et al 2022; Najadat et al 2022) discussed forms of fake news in Arab media post the Arab Spring. “News fabrication” was seen as the dominant form of fake news, especially on social media. With the fragmentation of media and its war over clicks and shares, several news media—especially in Lebanon and Egypt—fell into the trap of news fabrication either intentionally or by failing to verify sources. Exploiting the political instability in both countries, fabricating news and posting false statements were a common practice that led several news outlets to behave in an atypical way for the yellow press. In Egypt, for example, the Supreme Council for Media Regulation counted 74,000 fabricated news pieces in one month. Unfortunately, poor working conditions contributed to this phenomenon. Several newspapers across the region hire journalists for their ability to publish news and generate clicks rather than their ability to produce high-quality journalism (El Gody and Ezz El Din 2023). In Jordan and Egypt, to try to secure a permanent position in media institutions, junior and trainee journalists tend to hire active internet users that surf the net for news and information in order to guarantee that their stories are published.

This issue gave rise to another—“sloppy reporting”—where news stories are presented in incorrect contexts or interpret information inaccurately. Such news, while not entirely fabricated, tends to support ongoing narratives without factual basis, often becoming contentious when ideologies or biases come into play (Chan 2019; Cunha 2019). In countries like Egypt and Tunisia, a form of ‘development journalism’ emerged, primarily designed to support the government's post-revolution reconstruction narrative (Allam and El Gody 2021). However, this model soon regressed into propaganda-style news reporting, serving primarily to uphold the government's agenda.

In multiple instances, governments have been the originators of misleading information, thereby inducing a “Moral Panic Effect” in society and positioning the elite as the rescuers. This propaganda strategy is particularly prevalent among Gulf states, aimed at averting democratic waves from descending into civil unrest, as witnessed in Libya and Syria. Consequently, news narratives, headlines, and imagery often appear monotonous, emanating from governmental offices. Editors and journalists are generally expected to publish received information without extensive development or investigative scrutiny (El Gody and Ezz El Din 2023).

The practice of spreading misinformation through “satire and parody” is also prevalent in the region. Audiences often propagate humorous and



satirical content as factual information (Alonso 2012). For example, content from satirical shows like *ElBernameg* and *Joe show* (mock commentary programs that combine(d) comedy and political discussions that tackled a variety of political topics and public figures ranging from presidential candidates to government officials to media figures) have been reproduced and treated as factual, necessitating action.

Furthermore, "image and video manipulation" has become a common method of generating fake news post-Arab Spring. This technique involves editing photos with specific software or misrepresenting real images as being from a different time or location (Giansiracusa 2021). Such forms of misinformation are rampant, and many manipulated videos have been used in satirical entertainment programs, particularly aimed at political groups in Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Egypt. Furthermore, fabricated videos have been used during armed conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, as well as in intercultural conflicts, such as those involving Shiites in Bahrain (El Gody 2021).

The spread of misinformation has profoundly impacted Arab news media. Fake news has contributed to the sharp drop in newspaper circulation and television viewership, ranging from 30% to 70% across the region. Accompanying this decline is a dip in public trust, with faith in Arab news sources plummeting by 40% over the past five years, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis where several Arab governments deliberately provided mis-information about the number of casualties or provided false information about vaccination/treatment protocols (Sadiki 2018; Martin and Hassan 2020; Ahmed and Rasul 2022; Al Ghazzi and Al Najjar 2022). A study conducted on news media performance and journalistic ethics between 2019-2022 revealed that approximately 80% of the Middle Eastern audience holds a skeptical view of the media's role in providing truthful information. Respondents cited that the news they access through media websites and social media platforms often appears inaccurate and manipulated (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Hamdy and Auter, 2021). An additional 51% argued that the conflicting information arising from misinformation contributes to societal confusion.

Increasingly, audiences are turning to entertainment shows and social media platforms for their news consumption. To counteract misinformation, several media outlets across the Arab region have initiated the use of tools to verify online information and have formed dedicated teams. Some newspapers, particularly in Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia, have partnered with international media. For instance, Lebanese newspaper *Al Nahar* collaborates with organizations like *Le Monde* and *Libération*, employing fact-checking tools such as DECODEX and Désintox. Moreover, *Al Nahar* has sent numerous staff members to specialized training programs to enhance their proficiency in detecting fake sources.



As we launch this special issue focused on fake news in the Middle East, it is crucial to underscore the importance of examining the proliferation of fake news in the Arab world. Fake news has been a significant area of research in international media studies, given its implications for politics, public opinion, and democracy. Western scholars have examined the origins, spread, and impact of fake news, as well as strategies for detection and prevention. They've looked at everything from the role of social media platforms in amplifying fake news, to the effects of fake news on political discourse, to the psychology behind why individuals believe and share fake news. Furthermore, several studies have also analyzed the global implications of fake news, especially in terms of election meddling, interference in democratic processes, and global geopolitics. In contrast, there seems to be a relative lack of scholarly research on the issue of fake news in the Arab region. Several factors—including language barriers, political restrictions, lack of funding, cultural factors, censorship and self-censorship, challenges in research methodology, and limited international collaboration—account for this gap in the literature. This region, marked by its rich cultural, political, and social diversity, is a potent backdrop for understanding the complexities of misinformation. Particularly in the age of digital media, where high internet and social media penetration fuels the rapid spread of fake news, understanding this phenomenon is critical. Examining fake news within the Arab World context can illuminate how disinformation may shape public discourse, sway political dynamics, inflame conflicts, and exploit societal divisions. Therefore, this issue is dedicated to deepening our understanding of these dynamics, contributing to global efforts to combat misinformation, and enhancing media literacy.

In this special issue focusing on fake news in the Middle East, we address the increasing challenges posed by misinformation within the digital media domain.

Sameera Tahira Ahmed's research explores young news consumers in the UAE. It examines how they leverage news literacy knowledge to discern and navigate false news. Recognizing these individuals as digitally empowered, the study reveals their use of the 5As of media literacy education (Access, Analyze, Assess, Apply, and Act) in battling fake news. Such practices, including source evaluation and responsible sharing, illuminate ways to diminish the reach and impact of misinformation.

The second article by Kenza Oumlil delves into marginalized communities, such as sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco. These groups, often overlooked or negatively portrayed in mainstream media, are now shaping their narratives digitally, with a special focus on gender issues. An insightful case in point is Hassan Yemcheu's "Planet Migrant" on YouTube, spotlighting sub-Saharan migrant women in Morocco. Given this context, grasping both mainstream and self-made media portrayals—and the misinformation



therein—is essential for effective policy, media literacy enhancement, and misinformation counteraction. This issue seeks to amplify our comprehension of these patterns in the Arab World, highlighting the pivotal role of constructive journalism and digital storytelling against the tide of misinformation.

Mahitab Ezz El Din's article underscores the impact of media portrayals, especially concerning marginalized populations. Media frequently misrepresents refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrant communities, often favoring stereotypes. This skewed representation is magnified by the chosen voices representing these communities. Thus, journalism must evolve to authentically depict the "hybrid identity" and foster societal cohesion and well-being.

Joseph Gibbs' study meticulously examines Hamas' online presence on Twitter, with a focus on the Palinfoen account tied to the Palestinian Information Centre (PIC). An analysis of 3,500 tweets regarding Palestinian events, employing digital ethnography and a discourse-historical lens, unveiled predominant themes. These centered around journalist Shireen Abu Akleh and Israel, framing Abu Akleh as a victim of Israeli brutality, and Israel as the antagonist responsible for her demise. The narrative also prominently features the Al-Aqsa Mosque incidents, presenting contrasting depictions of Israelis and Palestinians.

In the fifth contribution, Mohammedwesam Amer delves into the intricacies of crime reporting in the UAE, a nation marked by a Loyalist Press media paradigm. The article sheds light on the dual functionality of laws: they preserve police investigation secrecy, individual privacy, and deter misinformation but might also curtail timely news dissemination and authentic information sharing. The exposition contextualizes these laws through the lens of Social Responsibility Theory, drawing from UAE statutes, media reports in both English and Arabic, and insights from UAE journalists and police media representatives, often sourced from academic events and discussions.

Lastly, Sarah El Mokadem's piece assesses the role of media literacy in detecting fake news, set against the backdrop of misinformation magnified by deepfake AI technology. Using a quasi-experimental model rooted in Inoculation Theory, 204 Egyptians were grouped into three categories. Two were educated on misinformation and deepfake technology, while one, serving as a control, wasn't. The research showed that media literacy bolstered fake news detection and decreased false message dissemination, emphasizing the importance of integrating knowledge about general misinformation and cutting-edge technologies, like deepfake, into media literacy courses.



This collection of research papers makes significant strides in understanding and combating the complex issue of fake news in Arab media. The studies outlined here reveal that the problem is multifaceted, touching on aspects from media representation, self-narratives of marginalized communities, online discourses of influential organizations, youth engagement with news literacy, to the legal and cultural nuances of crime reporting, and the impact of media literacy on discerning fake news. Each research paper, in its unique way, contributes to the larger discourse around fake news and misinformation, providing comprehensive insights into its current state, effects, and potential strategies for mitigation.

In this era of digital proliferation, where misinformation is rampant and can be potentially damaging, this compilation of research papers is particularly relevant and timely. They underscore the need for media literacy, critical evaluation of sources, and constructive journalism to uphold the integrity of information. They also highlight the growing necessity to address emerging technologies like deepfake that fuel the spread of fake news. This volume serves as a valuable resource for media professionals, policy-makers, researchers, and educators, inspiring a conscious and collective effort to counteract fake news in Arab media, and fostering an information environment that is grounded in truth, accuracy, and reliability.

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